

THE ARGOSY.

SEPTEMBER, 1890.

THE HOUSE OF HALLIWELL.

BY MRS. HENRY WOOD, AUTHOR OF "EAST LYNNE."

CHAPTER XXIII.

AT MIDDLEBURY.

SEVERAL years again passed, and we need take no particular note of them; for they were pregnant with little of moment to the branches of the Halliwell family: afterwards, events came crowding thick and fast. Hester was now getting to be a woman nearer fifty than forty, those who were boys and girls were growing into men and women, and little children to boys and girls.

A tragical event, full of mystery and suspicion, occurred about this time in Dr. Goring's family. It will be better (as we have done once before) to let Hester relate it in her own words.

I did not often go down to Middlebury: about once in every three or four years. Dr. Goring (he was not "Dr." Goring: only "Matthew Goring, surgeon and apothecary;" but the townsfolk in Middlebury would style him "Dr.", as is the case sometimes in country places) and Mary had been married about sixteen years, when she had a dangerous illness, and, as it was our midsummer holidays and leisure time with me, I went to Middlebury. They had then six children (without counting the infant who had just died), Mary, the eldest, a gentle, good girl of fifteen, just like her mother. I found my sister ill indeed, and for the first fortnight I did little but watch by her bedside.

Now I am apt to take likes and dislikes when I meet with strangers for the first time. People say it is prejudice, so I suppose it is; but it is a prejudice sometimes for, and sometimes against. And I may mention, in defence of this "prejudice" (which I can no more keep from me than I can keep the moon from shining on my house), that I never yet found the instinct mislead me. There was a governess when I went down to Dr. Goring's this time, a Miss Howard. She was sufficiently good-looking, with a colourless face and a very

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"OH, EMMA," EMPLORED ANNIE, IN DEEP AGITATION, "TELL THE TRUTH. YOU KNOW IT CANNOT BE HIDDEN ALWAYS."
R. TAYLOR.
M. ELLEN STAPLES.

subdued tone and manner of speaking, so remarkably gentle as to impart the idea (to me, at least) that it was more assumed than genuine. I took a strange antipathy to this lady when I first saw her; though she appeared willing to be on friendly terms with me, that instinctive power never warned me more strongly against any one. She was about five-and-thirty, but she dressed herself to look younger.

I sat one afternoon in my sister's room, thinking over the observations I had made during my fortnight's stay. I did not like them all. I saw my relatives were living at a high rate of extravagance, which no income—such as theirs—could possibly justify; and I felt sure that that governess was scheming to attract Matthew Goring towards her. *He*, upon the slightest inducement, was ever ready to flirt, and Middlebury knew it. He was a universal favourite, especially with the ladies, gentlemanly, generous, and affable; but he was too fond of talking nonsense, though a kind and affectionate husband.

"What made you think of taking a governess into the house, Mary?" I suddenly asked, letting my work drop in my lap.

"We did it by way of economy," was Mrs. Goring's reply. "The school bills of the two girls were frightfully heavy, and little Jane is coming on now."

"I would have retrenched home expenses, Mary, and have kept the children at school. Your rate of living is enormously extravagant."

"It really is. But we have somehow fallen into this style of house-keeping, and Matthew would not like to retrench. I fear, though he will not acknowledge it to me, that we are living beyond our income. And if I had died during this illness, as was too likely at one period of it, my annuity would have been lost to him."

"Three hundred a-year is a heavy sum to lose in a family," I remarked.

"It is not so much as that," she quickly replied. "The insurance takes up—I forget exactly what, but I think more than a hundred of it."

"What insurance?" I said.

"I insured my life some years ago. Did I never tell you about it? I should think I did."

But she had not. I never heard of it until then.

"It was after a very bad illness, when Jane was born," my sister went on. "They thought that I should lose my life, and so did I think it. And whilst I lay here, getting better, it occurred to me that though I could not continue the annuity to my children I might insure my life with part of it, and thus secure them something. So I insured it for three thousand pounds."

"I am very glad to hear it," I said. "Your husband ought to insure his."

"He has often talked of it, but has never been able to spare the money. We live quite up to our income, Hester; or beyond it."

"Which is the height of imprudence. Suppose you were both—

suppose anything were to happen to you both ; there would be absolutely nothing for the children but this three thousand pounds."

"Nothing. Except the furniture and any book debts."

"Six children, and only three thousand pounds !" I mused ; "what would become of them ?" And I put on my considering cap again, and began to work out an idea which had been haunting me for some days. "Mary," I said after awhile, "suppose I relieve you of one of the girls—Mary, if you can spare her—and take her to London with me, and finish her education free of expense to you ; could you not put the other two to school, discharge the governess, and retrench your home expenses ? You might retrench them, it seems to me, by one half, and yet live in sufficiently good style."

"I am quite willing to retrench, if you can bring Matthew into the same mind," said Mrs. Goring. "But do you believe it would be more economy to place even two children at school than to keep a governess ?"

"Yes, I do," was my decided answer. "If I am to help in this matter at all, Mary, Miss Howard must leave."

I suppose I spoke too pointedly, and so overshot my mark, for Mary looked at me, and a warm flush came into her face.

"Hester ! you do not like Miss Howard ?"

"She may be a good instructress," I coldly answered, "but, in my opinion, is not altogether a desirable person to retain in your house, the guide and companion of Mary."

"I see what you think," cried my sister, nervously throwing one arm out of bed ; "you think she is too familiar with my husband."

"Her manners are certainly not what I approve, Mary."

"But you know that Matthew talks and laughs with everyone," again said Mrs. Goring. "And some young women are so vain as to mistake that for pointed attentions."

"There is not much harm in laughing and talking, when it's confined to that," I growled, feeling angry with Matthew, in my heart, "but his children's governess should be an exception, even from this."

"So I told him," said my sister, "for I did remonstrate with him, one day, about it. In the drawing-room, in my presence, he will pay her more attention than he does me ; at the dinner-table the same : once, in coming home late at night, he gave her his arm, and left me to walk with Mary."

"Then she ought not to have taken it," I interrupted. "No rightminded woman would."

"And he seems to talk to her about all sorts of confidential things, often in a whisper : family matters, money matters, which ought to be conversed on only with me. I believe, too, they go out walking together, or, rather, join each other when they get outside the town, which is very bad on Miss Howard's part. But it is not so much the bare fact of all this that I dislike, as ——"

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"As what?" I asked, finding Mary hesitate.

"Their manners to each other—though I scarcely know how to express what I mean. They are more considerate, more tender, implying, seemingly, a mutual understanding between themselves and against me. But I must do my husband the justice to say that I believe he never would have thought of all this, but for her first advances to him. I saw them, quiet and covert as they were."

"And seeing this, noting this, you can and have kept that woman in your house," I uttered.

"Hester, at times I have been on the very point of discharging her, but then the thought has occurred to me that it may be all nothing, that Matthew's attractive manners may be alone in fault, and that I might be depriving the children of a good instructress (which she certainly is) through an absurd, jealous chimera. When I spoke to Matthew, as I told you, he only laughed at me, and wondered how I could be so very ridiculous. So I dropped the subject, thinking I was, perhaps, ridiculous. But, has the idea struck you, Hester, during your short stay, that there is too good an understanding between her and my husband?"

"Oh, I don't say so far as that," I evasively replied, finding she was more alive to the affair than I had suspected. "Your husband's manners are very free, though they generally mean nothing."

"If I thought there was anything wrong between them," murmured my poor sister—"I do not mean really wrong," she added, interrupting herself; "of course I do not, and could not suspect that; but if I thought there was any positive attachment—that he loved her as he once loved me—I think it would kill me. I have lain here, when I was at the worst, conjuring up a picture—myself gone and forgotten, and *she* the second mother of my children."

"Now, Mary, you are going from one extreme to the other," I remonstrated. But what more I would have said was interrupted by the entrance of the sick-nurse, Mrs. Gill, who came to take my place; and I went downstairs to find my brother-in-law.

I had heard him come in, not long before, and supposed I should find him in the surgery. This surgery had two entrances to it: one leading from the passage, just past the door of the dining-room; the other from the garden at the back of the house. The passage door, by which I was about to enter, was pushed to, but not closed; and as I was going to push it open, I heard the voice of Miss Howard inside. I have, all my life, endeavoured to be honourable in my actions, and I hope I have shunned everything mean; but I thought it my duty to listen then.

"I shall soon become a chemist if you bestow these pains upon me," she was saying, with her soft insinuating accents, false as she was. "And what is this?"

"Oh, that's a very common-place article," responded the merry voice of my brother-in-law, "that's castor oil."

"Oh dear! And this?"

"That's more common still. It is distilled water."

"That little bottle, up there, labelled 'Poison'—it is always kept by itself in that same place, I observe—is it prussic acid?"

"No; but a poison quite as deadly. It is a preparation of strychnia."

"How is it administered?"

"A very minute portion, taken in water, would destroy life. Shall I try it upon yours?"

"Would you?" she murmured, with an affectation of submissive tenderness. "I will give you leave to do so if you wish."

"My darling girl," he replied, "you know I would rather try it on my own."

Then came a silence, and I pushed open the door: but may I never speak truth again, if I did not first hear a sound like a kiss. Matthew Goring had her hand in his, and was whispering, and she stood there passively, her hand passively resting there, her countenance and her eyes cast down in a passive attitude of listening. It was evident, that if he was ready to court, she was more than willing to be courted. On his side—I believe so, even now—it was probably only the passing amusement of an idle moment: her conduct wore an aspect far deeper and more reprehensible. I have asked myself, since, whether I was blinded by prejudice, or partiality, in thus judging her to be worse than he, and I cannot bring myself to think so. What business had she out of her own proper place, the school or drawing-room? What business had she to go hunting to his professional apartments after him, with her wicked excuse of wanting to learn chemistry, and her soft voice, subdued to child-like innocence?

I think we all looked rather foolish. The governess drew her hand away, and was the first to break the silence. Which she did with the utmost equanimity.

"Dr. Goring is willing to give me a little insight into the matter of drugs and chemistry," she began, "so I endeavour, in my few leisure moments, to profit by his kindness. A woman, as instructress of youth, cannot know too much: do you think she can, Miss Halliwell?"

"I think a woman may acquire an insight into things entirely unfitted for her, unless she takes care what she is about," I answered, quite angrily. "A knowledge of drugs is not necessary for the instruction of Dr. Goring's daughters."

She said no more to me, but turned and thanked him, in a modest, retiring tone, perfectly charming—to anyone who had not seen her with her hand lying in his, and heard his kiss upon her lips.

"Matthew," I sharply said, as she hurried away, for I felt terribly cross, "all this must be put an end to."

"What must be put an end to?" he inquired, busying himself

with his tubes and chemical glasses, the uses of which he had probably been explaining to her, and whistling with unconcern.

"More things than one," I answered. "This familiarity with your daughters' governess is growing beyond a joke, and ——"

"You surely do not look upon that nonsense as serious?" he interrupted, holding a glass cylinder between his eye and the light to see that it was clean.

"I don't know what you call 'serious'" I indignantly said. "I heard you kiss her."

"Now, Hester," he remonstrated, laughing provokingly all the while, "you have not lived to these years without knowing that we men like to snatch a kiss from a pretty girl under the rose."

"Girl! pretty!" I ejaculated. "*She's* not much of either."

"An attractive woman, then; how you snap one up, Hester. And no disloyalty to our wives, either."

"Your behaviour to Miss Howard, and especially hers to you, is unbecoming in itself and a disgrace to both of you, when carried on in the sight of your wife and daughters," I persisted. "I say nothing of my sister: that she feels this deeply I have discovered to-day, but her retiring, generous disposition induces her to bear in silence what few wives would do. But your daughter! Mary is of an age to see and understand these things. Miss Howard must leave."

"I'm sure I don't care whether she leaves or not," responded the gentleman, with the most apparent unconcern. "But who the deuce is to take care of the children, if you send her away? and Mary ill in bed!"

"That is quite a secondary consideration," I remarked. "Have I your permission to discharge Miss Howard?"

"Well, I don't know. It will look absurdly strange: and so unnecessary. You do her great injustice, Hester, and me too, if you think there's anything wrong. What do you suppose I care for Miss Howard?"

"That you 'care' for her to any extent, I do not fear," I replied, "for when a woman, be she young or getting-on in life, so far forgets herself as to step between man and wife—to endeavour to worm herself clandestinely into his affections, all respect for that woman leaves his mind, and though he may frequent her society for the amusement of the hour, that woman has lost, for him, her greatest charm."

"Egad, you are right there, Hester!" cried Dr. Goring. "When a single woman lapses into a flirtation with a married man, and takes pains to conceal it from the world and the wife, we set her down as a silly fool, who might become something worse if she were tempted."

"Just so. They suit you for amusement, but they are not such as you would place in your home and at your hearth. Many a married man has his 'amusement' in this way, and will have it, I

suppose : but whoever is placed about your wife and children, be it friend, governess, or servant, should be made an exception to your rule of admiration."

"I declare I don't much admire Miss Howard," he laughed. "I think the admiration is mostly on her side."

"I think it is," I answered, dryly. "And that ought to have rendered it the more incumbent on you to discourage it."

Was his indifference put on? I have often wondered, since.

"And now to something else that must be put a stop to," I continued. "I told you, Matthew, there were more things than one."

"To my chemical experiments?" he asked, by way of mocking me.

"To your house extravagance. Mary says you are putting-by nothing out of your income."

"Putting-by! I should think not. The boot's on the other leg."

"Yet you must be in the receipt of eight or nine hundred a year."

"Not much less, besides Mary's money. But look at the expenses, Hester: the servants, the horses, the carriage, the visiting, the children! Matthew's school-bill, for last year, was nearly a hundred and twenty pounds."

"You should not send him to so expensive a one. You might live upon five hundred a year, and put by the rest."

"We 'might' live upon two hundred, I suppose, if we were driven to it. But I must keep up my position in the town, and that cannot be done with less than I spend."

"Yes it can," I earnestly added. "You do not need the carriage, you do not need so many servants, and you do not need to give your extravagant dinner and evening-parties. I am going to run away with Mary, and see what sort of a woman I can turn her out. I will promise you that she shall not be a second Miss Howard. The other two girls you can put to school. If I were mistress here, Matthew, I know I could diminish your expenses one-half, and only lop off superfluities, no comforts, no essentials."

"I wish to goodness you could, then," he said, with a good-humoured but incredulous curl on his lip. "Our bills are confoundedly heavy, and I don't always know where to pick up the money to meet them."

He put on his hat as he spoke, for he had to attend a consultation, but I stopped him to say I should at once discharge Miss Howard.

"Well, if it must be so, it must," was his reply, standing still and looking at me. "But you cannot turn her out of the house as you would a dog—you don't mean that. She must have a month's notice."

"If she insists upon it," I grumbled to myself, as I went to look for the governess. But I felt that any woman, with a spark of delicacy, would prefer to leave at once, under the circumstances.

I entered into no particulars with Miss Howard; I did not allude

to the scene of the surgery, but I said that Dr. and Mrs. Goring had come to the resolution of making a change. They were about to place their daughters at school and had no further occasion for her services, and that she might leave at her earliest convenience.

"I cannot leave without my proper notice," she exclaimed, turning as white as a sheet. "The agreement with Mrs. Goring was a month's notice on either side."

"Then I give it you now," I said, and there I stopped and hesitated. But I thought it better to go on with what I was about to say. "May I suggest, Miss Howard, that for the month you insist upon remaining here, your manners to Dr. Goring may be characterised by more reserve and circumspection?"

"What do you mean?" she retorted.

"It would be superfluous to tell you, since you must well understand my meaning," I replied. "But I may observe, for your future guidance, that if a young woman knew how entirely she forfeits respect when she lapses into undue intimacy with a married man, the respect, not only of the world, *but of him*, we should see less of this selfish and thoughtless conduct than we are compelled now to see. When an unmarried woman suffers herself to lapse into this discreditable intimacy, she stands little chance, let me tell you, of ever becoming a married one."

"That probably is the cause of your being still single," she burst forth, sending a sneer at my advancing years.

"No, thank God," I fervently responded. "My principles and self-esteem have not yet sunk so low as to suffer me to step between man and wife. A woman, a single woman, who can stoop to flirt with a married man, to draw him to her side, regardless of the outrage to the feelings of his wife, is guilty of as great a crime as are those poor fallen creatures who set themselves out to lead men into guilt. And this opinion is Dr. Goring's as well as mine. Never you descend again to play yourself off upon a married man, Miss Howard, he will not thank you for it long."

She looked round the room with her livid face, livid with anger. I thought she was looking for something to throw at me, and to avoid that, and any further unpleasantness, I quitted the room, reminding her that as that was the 1st of July, the day of her departure would be the 1st of August.

That same evening, after tea, I was sitting with Mrs. Goring, when my eldest niece came into the chamber.

"Mamma," she said, "Mrs. Stone and Emily have sent for me in, and to take my music. May I go?"

"Yes if you like, Mary," replied my sister. "Where's Frances?"

"I think she is in the nursery, dressing Jane's doll."

"Then where's Miss Howard?"

"I don't know, mamma," was Mary's answer. "I saw her, after tea, in the garden with papa."

That was enough for me, and downstairs I went. "There shall be no private and confidential interviews if I can help it," quoth I to myself. I went by way of the surgery: not because I wanted to steal into the garden by the more private way, but because I thought they might be at that excuse of their chemicals again. The surgery was empty. I thought the garden was, at first, but as I stood in the corner, just outside the little surgery door, I heard the sound of subdued voices in the summer-house. So I went up the narrow side-path, against the apricot wall, my feet almost treading on the straggling strawberry plants. And Miss Frances, by the way, was not in the nursery. I heard her laughing with the servants in the kitchen.

They did not see me come up: the door of the summer-house faced the other side-wall of the garden. The first words I was near enough to hear were from her.

"What right has she to come down and make these changes, and interfere in your household? You must have the temper of an angel to put up with it."

"The truth is, my dear" (it was his voice now), "that, as I hinted to you, I am drained dry and ready to catch at straws. Mrs. Goring has no idea that my embarrassments are serious: but if we go on at our present rate of living, we shan't long go on at all. If we can retrench expenses, and so patch up matters, exposure may be avoided. Miss Halliwell's offer of taking Mary is a great help, now that the most expensive period of her education is coming on: but she does this only on condition that the others shall be put to school."

"She has taken a dislike to me," murmured the lady, in a sweetly plaintive tone. "Old maid's prejudices are unfathomable."

This was good from her, with her five-and-thirty years! I don't know what answer Matthew made. I heard none.

"You are a little in debt?" she went on to ask.

"Jolly well deep in it," was his reply. "It would take many hundreds to set me free."

"Mrs. Goring has property, I have heard. Can you not make it available?"

"Mrs. Goring's money is an annuity, and it dies with her."

"All of it?"

"All. But her life is insured for three thousand pounds."

"What a help that would be to you! It would free you, and doubly free you. What a good thing!"

"Why, you speak," laughed Matthew, "as if it were something coming to me to-morrow. My ever having it is the most remote contingency in the world. She may outlive me. And, if not, Mrs. Goring intends that money to go to the children, not to pay off my extravagances."

There is always a little corner of thankfulness in my heart when I think of that sentence, and of Matthew's cheery, hearty expression when he gave utterance to it. It seems to repeat over to me

that he was not the guilty man, the man with murder on his soul, that some have since deemed him.

"Mrs. Goring's life seems a precarious one," she went on to say: "she is always ailing. I am sure if the three thousand pounds you speak of should drop in, it would be your duty to make use of it. Your ease and comfort should be paramount to every other consideration."

I fear a feeling of positive hatred rose in my heart when I heard her thus make light of the life of my dear sister and his wife. I gave a great cough to let them know I was there, and walked round to the front of the arbour.

She came out then, but not before I saw him draw his arm from round her waist, and she went towards the house.

"Where is Miss Frances?" I said to her.

"With her sister," replied Miss Howard.

"She is in the kitchen with the servants," I retorted. "And I apprehend Mrs. Goring would not approve of her making them her companions."

I said no more. If I had, I might have said too much; and I resolutely bit my lip to impose self-silence. My gentleman had sauntered off, towards the vegetables.

I did not see much, after that, during my stay. To be sure, I was out a good deal then, calling on old friends, and sometimes to spend the evening, so that those two, if they wished, may have found opportunities of being together without my knowing it. My sister was improving in health, and sat up for several hours each day, but she did not yet leave her room.

CHAPTER XXIV.

"DIED FROM POISON."

OUR own pupils were coming back to us the 10th of July: for we have never followed the bad custom of giving six or seven weeks' holiday: and on the 7th I returned home, there being several household matters I wished to arrange before they came. I took Frances with me—Mrs. Goring, in her weak, nervous state, seemed unwilling to part with Mary, who could now make herself useful in many ways—and quitted Middlebury early in the morning, reaching London and home the same evening.

I was up betimes the next day: I am always an early riser: but we breakfasted later than usual, for at eight o'clock Frances was still sleeping. We would not begin without her, and yet did not like to disturb her, for she was tired, poor child, with her journey, so that it was past nine when we sat down to breakfast.

I was pouring out the second cups of tea, when the postman's knock was heard at the door, and our cook—the other servants

being at that hour engaged in their upstairs duties—came in with a letter.

"Twopence, ma'am," said cook.

"Twopence!" I answered, diving into my pocket, "who can have sent a letter unpaid?"

"It is to ask for a prospectus, no doubt," observed Lucy, who had taken the letter, while I paid cook. "But it has the Middlebury postmark!"

"It is Mary's writing, I am sure, Aunt Hester," observed the little girl; "and what a great sprawling seal she has put! She has been getting at papa's wax, too, for it is black."

I took the letter out of Lucy's hand, and a sort of unpleasant tremor came over me when I gazed on the black seal. Mary Goring, in her little notes to her young friends, was so fond of displaying her blue, scented wax. Why had she now used black?

I opened the letter: it was blotted, as if written and folded in haste, and but few words were in it. I ran my eye hastily over them, and screamed out. Had my life depended on my not screaming, I could not have helped myself, the shock was so terrible; though I have great command over my feelings in general: how else should I be fitted to train the young?

"Oh come back to us, my dear Aunt Hester! Mamma is dead. And they say she is poisoned. Papa is crying dreadfully. Come directly.

"Your affectionate niece,

"MARY GORING."

Now were not those words enough to make me scream?

I went at once. I sent cook out for a cab, taking off my gingham dress and putting on my black silk one while she was gone, and my shawl and bonnet; and when she came back in it I was ready, and drove away to the Paddington Railway Station. I left the letter with Lucy, but we did not tell Frances. I only said to her that her mamma was not so well. Girls of twelve are easily satisfied.

I could not get off till the twelve o'clock train, and it was night when the Middlebury omnibus—which had to take me the concluding miles of my journey—reached Middlebury. I trust I shall never again have to pass such a day as that. My suspense and anxiety were hard to bear. Sometimes I felt as if the railway train did not go quickly enough, and that I must rise from my seat and try to fly over the intervening distance; at others, it seemed as if nothing so horrible could have happened, and that Mary's letter must have been a dream. A gentleman in the same carriage offered me the *Times* to read. I took it, and held it before my eyes; but the letters seemed to swim, and when I did get to read a sentence, I could not understand it. So I thanked him, and put it down again.

I knocked when I reached my brother-in-law's; very softly, as became a house where death was. Susan opened the door, the

housemaid : a neat, tidy girl. "Oh, ma'am ! Oh, ma'am !" she exclaimed, putting up her hands when she saw me. "But I am glad you are come."

"Is your mistress—alive ?" I asked. I don't know why I should have said that ; for surely no hope could have lurked within me, after the letter.

"Dear ma'am," she uttered, bursting into tears, "alive ! she died yesterday afternoon. Master's in there," she added, gently opening the door of the dining-room.

He was in there alone, sitting moodily by the window, and there was no light in the room, saving what came from the street gas-lamp outside, through the muslin curtains and the white blind. Even in that uncertain light I could see the traces of suffering—his pale face, his disordered hair and his swollen eyes.

"Oh, Hester, Hester !" he exclaimed, coming forward and taking both my hands, "this is dreadful."

I cannot remember all that passed. I believe I asked to see her, I asked particulars about her death and I wept with him.

It was already known, beyond doubt, that the cause of her death was poison. She had dined at one o'clock and had lain down on the bed after it to sleep, as was usual since her illness : some toast-and-water stood at the bed-side ; and when she awoke thirsty, and asked for drink, the nurse gave her this. She drank it, complained of its bitter taste, fell into convulsive pains and soon after died.

"Could anything have been put into the toast-and-water ?" I exclaimed.

"So it would appear," he answered, "but it is a great mystery."

"Then, Matthew Goring," I rejoined, peering steadily at him, "who can have put it in ?"

"I know not," he answered, earnestly. "As the Lord liveth and looketh down upon me, Hester, I am as ignorant and innocent of this business as you are."

"Where was Miss Howard at the time ?"

"Hester," he gravely said, "you are prejudiced against Miss Howard, but for the love of justice do not carry it so far as to cast this suspicion upon her. A gentlewoman of character, of refined feeling ; and you would point to her as being guilty of a crime, black as night !"

"It is you who are blindly prejudiced in her favour," I replied to him. "I do think, if she were proved guilty of this, *you* would not believe it."

"I should not," was Matthew's avowal. "Not from any reason you hint at, but because I feel her to be utterly incapable of even thinking of such a crime, much less committing it. But pray do not continue to suspect me of any undue preference for her, Hester. If, as you once hinted, she caused uneasiness to my dear wife, I wish, to my soul, she had never come inside the house."

"Ay, that's always the case—repentance when it is too late. Many

a man would be more careful not to give his wife cause for anxiety, if he thought he was soon to lose her." I could not help saying that : it was in my thoughts, so out it came.

I did suspect Miss Howard : and many a time, since, have I prayed to be forgiven if I suspected her wrongly : but, alas ! I suspect her still. In Dr. Goring's present mood, it was of no use harping upon it. I went upstairs with him, into his chamber. My ill-fated sister was lying there, on the bed where I had left her the previous morning, getting well ; and now she was cold and lifeless.

"Will there be an inquest," I asked, when I could check my tears.

"It will be held to-morrow," he replied.

"She does not look as though she had died from poison," I said, gazing on her calm, pale features. "What poison was it?"

"Strychnia. The traces have been detected in her, and also in the toast-and-water remaining in the glass."

"Matthew," I said, looking at him, "you pointed that very poison out to Miss Howard the other day, in your surgery. I was halting at the door to come in, and heard what you said."

"True. She was asking me the names of various articles, and that amongst the rest. I remember it."

"Could the poison which has destroyed *her* have come from that bottle?"

"Hester, I know no more than you where the poison came from," he replied, his tones full of mourning and anguish ; "I wish I did know. The phial still stands in the same place in the surgery, and appears not to have been touched."

"What name is it that you call it?"

"It was a preparation of strychnia."

"That must be a new poison. I never heard of it."

"It is one but little known, excepting to medical men."

The sick-nurse, Mrs. Gill, gave me the most explicit account of the awful business. As I was leaving the death chamber with Dr. Goring, she was passing, and I turned back into it with her. He went downstairs. She was a good old soul, but very unsuspicious.

"My poor missis had dined sumptuously, ma'am, for her appetite was a-coming back to her, as you know. The wing and breast of a roast fowl, and a bit of bacon, and parsley-and-butter, and some porter. Dr. Goring ran up, when he had done carving for them in the parlour, with a decanter of port wine in his hand. 'Some glasses, Mrs. Gill,' he said and I brought 'em to him, and he poured out the wine. My missis drank one glass, and he drank two : he wanted her to have another, and said it wouldn't hurt her, but she said, No, not as she had taken the porter. So he left the decanter on the mantel-piece, and told me to be sure and give her a glass about seven in the evening, if he was not in, himself. Then she laid down on the bed for her afternoon's sleep, and he leaned over her and gave her a kiss—for, if he did—ahem !—if he did admire other faces, he

was a most tender man to his wife—and he went downstairs. I followed him, to go to my dinner, only stopping to pour out a glass of toast-and-water, and put it by my missis, as I always did in the afternoon. Sometimes she would drink it all, and sometimes she'd not drink any of it, but she liked it to be there. Well, ma'am, I went down, shutting the bedroom door after me, to keep out the noise. I didn't hurry over my dinner, and that's the truth, for I thought my missis would be asleep and wouldn't want me, and I know it must have been a-getting on for three when I got back upstairs. The bedroom door was not closed then, only pushed to, so I knew somebody had been in the room: in my own mind, I supposed it was Miss Mary. I stole in, and looked at my missis: she was sleeping sweetly—here, ma'am, on her own side of the bed. Well I went and stood for a minute at the window, and there I saw Mrs. Cox's carriage come a-rattling down the street, with her and Miss in it. It stopped at our door, and their great oaf of a footboy got down, and gave such a peal upon the knocker as shook the house. My missis started up in a fright. 'What's that noise, nurse?' she called out; 'any of the children hurt?' 'Bless you, no, ma'am,' says I, 'it's that dratted knocker. I wish folks wouldn't come a-noising and calling here, when people's asleep as wants sleep.' And for nothing, it weren't but to leave a card, for the carriage and Mrs. and Miss druv off again. 'Try and doze a bit more, ma'am,' I said. 'I don't know,' said my missis, 'I think I am thoroughly aroused. Give me some toast-and-water, nurse, I am thirsty.' 'That's the bacon, ma'am,' I said, and handed her the glass of toast-and-water, which stood ready on the little table by the bedside where I had put it. She drank it nearly all. 'It's as bitter as gall, Mrs. Gill,' she exclaimed; 'what have you done to it?' 'Bitter?' I said, 'why I made it with my own two sinful hands this morning, and I'm sure the bread weren't burnt. It was not bitter before dinner.' With that I turned to the jug, which stood atop of the drawers, and poured a drop into one of the wineglasses, after rinsing the drain of port wine out, and tasted it. And I felt then that missis's mouth must be out of taste, for it was not bitter at all, but sweet, fresh toast-and-water. I did not say so, for it ain't my place, ma'am, to contradict my ladies' fancies, and they weak and ill, but was a-going to wash out the two wineglasses, when I saw missis a-gasping on the bed. I rang the bell furiously, a deal longer and fiercer than that blundering footboy had pealed upon the knocker, and Dr. Goring, who was a-smoking in the arbour——"

"Smoking where?" I asked.

"In the arbour, ma'am, the summer-house in the garden. He heard the ringing and came flying up. Susan came at the same time, and Miss Mary came. Oh, ma'am, I can hardly tell you what happened next: my missis was in dreadful agony, and the room was full of confusion, servants and children crowding out and in. Dr. Goring

was the first to call out that she must have been poisoned, and the other doctors, when they came, said the same. They could not save her, and before five she was gone. Poor Miss Mary took on the least, to look at, but she felt it, I saw, more than any of them, except her father. It was me as whispered her to send for you, and she wrote a line, standing up, and Susan tore off with it, without a bonnet, and without a stamp, that she might save the post. I thought it right that you should be here, ma'am."

"Quite right," I said. "But now, Nurse Gill, answer me a serious question. How, and when, could the poison have been administered to Mrs. Goring?"

"When she drank the toast-and-water, ma'am," was the old woman's unhesitating reply. "I put my finger into the little that was left in the glass and tasted it, and sure enough it was as bitter as wormwood. Dr. Goring tasted it also after me, and told me to tie a bladder over it, and lock it up in my cupboard till the doctors came: he said there was poison in it. The doctors have got it now; they tasted it when I gave it to them, and they called the poison by a hard name, and Dr. Goring said he had got some of the same sort of poison in his surgery."

"Nurse, how could the poison have got into the glass?"

"Why, ma'am, it couldn't have got there of its own accord, so it must have been put in; but if you hung me I never could guess who by. Who in this house would do such a thing? None of us. If we could only find out who had been in the room!"

"Where was Dr. Goring?"

"Smoking in the arbour, ma'am, as I told you. When I followed him downstairs, as I was a-going to my dinner, I saw him stroll up the garden, and go into it, with his case of cigars and a newspaper. He was a-lighting a cigar as he went."

"Was he alone?"

"Quite alone, ma'am. The day afore, the two young gentlemen was with him, but they was both out yesterday. Master Goring had went spending the day in the country at the Halliwells', and young Alfred had went to school, for I see him from this window a-racing off to it, just as his papa came up with the wine."

"Could Dr. Goring have come in from the garden without being seen? Of course, Nurse Gill, you will not think I suspect him, in thus questioning," I proceeded, "but by throwing all possible light upon the movements of the house at that moment, we may obtain some clue to the real criminal."

"In course, ma'am," acquiesced the nurse, "nobody would be so wicked or so silly as to doubt Dr. Goring. A better husband never lived, barring a little bit of joking and talking that he is fond of having with the ladies—and most men are alike for that, so far as I see. He could not have come in without our seeing him, for our dinner-table was close to the window, and we had full view of the

garden. Unless," added the nurse slowly, as if debating the point with herself, "he had come down the little path leading to the surgery; but then some of us must have seen him come out of the arbour and cross to it. No, ma'am, he could not have come out at all."

"But you are not sure?" I urged.

"I would not swear it, but I'm morally sure," was her reply. "Rely upon it, ma'am, he never stirred out of that summer-house till I rang the bell and brought him rushing upstairs."

"Then let us go on again," I said. "Assuming that it could not be Dr. Goring or the servants——"

"I'll be upon my oath, ma'am, if necessary," interrupted the nurse, "that not a servant left the kitchen."

"The servants or the children," I proceeded, as if she had not broken the thread of my sentence, "there is no one else in the house—but Miss Howard."

"Dear, ma'am," uttered Nurse Gill, "you'd never go to suspect her! A handsome young lady—though not over young, maybe, for the matter of that—clever, educated, plays and sings like a cherrybim, and with her mild, quiet voice—I'd as soon think it was myself as her."

"I was only asking about the position of those in the house, if you remember, not talking of suspicion, nurse. Do you know where Miss Howard was whilst you were at dinner?"

"She was in the dining-room all the while, as I believe, and she never came out of it. Miss Mary can tell you the same, ma'am, if you'll please to have her called in."

"Will she be afraid to come in here?"

"Not she, ma'am. She has been in ten times, poor thing, a-sobbing over her mamma. She is either in the nursery or with Miss Howard, I suppose. I'll go and find her."

Mary came in. When her surprise—for Susan had not told her of my arrival—and her first burst of tears were over, I began to question her.

"Mary," I said, "I am trying to ascertain in what part of the house you all were yesterday, during Mrs. Gill's absence at dinner. Your papa was in the garden; the servants were in the kitchen; the boys were out; and you and little Jane, nurse says, were in the nursery."

"Yes, aunt, we were. Miss Howard had been in a passion with Jane at the morning's lessons, and she ordered her into the nursery, and sent her a piece of dry bread for dinner. I thought it was a shame, for it was only Miss Howard's temper that was in fault—but it has been very bad since she knew she must leave—and when papa rose from the dinner-table to go to mamma's room, Alfred ran off to school, and I went up in the nursery to take Jane some cherries, leaving Miss Howard in the dining-room."

"Did you see nothing of Miss Howard, after that, before the alarm?"

"Oh, yes. I went downstairs almost directly for some more cherries. She was still in the dining-room, netting, and I remember she complained of Alfred, and said he was a careless boy and had gone to school without washing his hands. I then went back to the nursery, and stayed there till nurse and baby came up from dinner."

"The nursemaid, she means, ma'am," interrupted Nurse Gill. "She left the kitchen as I did, and we both came up the stairs together. Baby—as they still call little John—had dropped asleep over his dinner, and she was a-going to lay him down. I say he sleeps too much for a child of three years old."

"And when the nursemaid went up, you went down," I remarked to Mary. "Where was Miss Howard then?"

"Still netting in the dining-room, Aunt Hester, and she looked as if she had not stirred from her seat. Soon afterwards mamma's bell rang violently."

"I won't say as she had not stirred from her seat, for I don't know nothing about that," broke in Mrs. Gill, "but I will say as she had not left the room, for, if she had, we must have heard her in the kitchen."

"Did you hear no one go up or down stairs?" I enquired.

"Not a soul," replied the woman, "and we had the kitchen door open. The house seemed as still as it is at this moment. If this dreadful thing had not happened, I could have been upon my oath that nobody had been near the stairs."

"You heard Miss Mary, when she came down for the cherries?"

"Of course, ma'am, we heard her: that was just as we were beginning dinner. We heard her come out of the nursery, run down the stairs, go into the dining-room, stop there a minute, run up again and shut the nursery door. You shut it with a bang, Miss Mary, and I said to the servants that missis had not had time to get to sleep, or it might have woke her."

"Still—talking, as you all no doubt were, over your dinner, Mrs. Gill—I think you could not have heard quiet footsteps on the stairs. And who ever did this deed, did not, you may be sure, go about it with noisy ones."

"Ma'am, we was unusually still. The cook—though, of course, you have not heard of it—had just had bad news. Her brother was at his mason's work atop of a house, and the ladder fell with him, and it was feared both his legs was broke. They had been to tell her of it, and she was as low as could be, though she weren't a-crying, and we was all sorry for her, and I can assure you we eat our dinners in silence, and there was hardly a word spoke. Sometimes there's enough talking and laughing going on with 'em, but there wasn't yesterday. I was just a-going to tell the news to my poor missis, when she was took."

"You heard nothing, Mary?" I said to her.

"Nothing at all, Aunt Hester. And we were quiet also in the nursery. Jane was eating the cherries and I was reading."

"You see, ma'am, it's a complete mystery," observed Nurse Gill.

It did indeed seem so, and I could not fathom it. I took an opportunity of asking Dr. Goring whether he had come in from the harbour or not, after going there.

"I never left it," he replied. "I had my cigars, and had stretched myself at ease on the bench, reading the county paper. The violent ringing of Mary's bell aroused me, and I ran in."

Oh yes, yes, I am sure he spoke the truth. I did not suspect Dr. Goring, for to commit a cruelty or a crime was foreign to Matthew's nature.

The coroner's inquest was held, but it failed to throw any light upon the mystery. Amongst the witnesses examined was Miss Howard. She deposed that she had been in the dining-room the whole of the time the nurse was at dinner, shut in there, and that she had heard nothing. Suspicion did not fall upon her, except in my own heart, and I could not openly accuse her. There were no proofs whatever. The verdict returned was, "Died from poison: but by whom administered there is no evidence to show."

On the day but one afterwards my dear sister was buried. The churchyard was so crowded with spectators that the clergyman could scarcely push his way through them, as he walked at the head of the coffin: and at the conclusion of the service, as the mourners were leaving the grave, a hiss arose from the crowd—they were hissing Dr. Goring. He, his sons, Matthew and Alfred, and Mr. Halliwell (Tom Halliwell, as we once called him, but his father was dead now—ah! Mary had better have had Tom, than have come to this dreadful ending) were the chief mourners, but several friends had followed. Matthew had gone direct to school from Mr. Halliwell's with a son of his, the very evening of his mother's death, but he was sent for to attend the funeral. He was a handsome, merry boy of fourteen, very like his father. Alfred was ten. I shall never forget poor Dr. Goring when he came in from the funeral. The lads went upstairs, but he came into the darkened dining-room where I was, and throwing his hat with its long crape streamers on a chair, sat down and sobbed as if his heart would break. I was not crying then, myself: I think I had cried so much that my eyes, for the moment, were drained dry, and I went up to him and begged him to be composed. "Hester," he sobbed; "Hester, they have been hissing me at Mary's grave. As you stand there, it is truth."

"Who has hissed you?" I asked.

"The mob in the churchyard. They whispered 'Murderer.' God knows I have not deserved it. If my dear wife was murdered, it was not by me. I would have given my life to prolong hers."

I thought it best not to talk just then, and he grew composed, after a while, though, I must say, his face was full of suffering and

sorrow ; but at night, when the candles were lighted and we were alone again, the children being in bed, I inquired what he meant to do.

"In what way?" he asked.

"About your children, and your housekeeping matters. Who is to conduct your house?"

"Oh, Hester, I cannot think of these things. They must take their chance. Unless you can put them on some sort of footing before you go back again."

I tried to do so. I saw Miss Howard out of the house (with a true thanksgiving) and I established Mary as housekeeper. Though only fifteen, she was so sensible and steady a girl that I had no fear of leaving her as such ; and she was to go as morning pupil to Miss Sherwood's school, till her education was completed. Matthew and Alfred were placed, together, at a less expensive establishment than the one Matthew had hitherto been in, and the little fellow, John, I consigned to Susan, who undertook the charge of him. I would have taken Jane back with me, but Matthew said he could not be deprived of wife and children at once. Then I induced Matthew to lay down the carriage, and discharge the coachman and two of the maids, and make a reduction in many other ways. Altogether, I did what I could, and left for home, with many words of advice to Mary, an injunction to her to write to me weekly, and a promise to go down at Christmas.

I have said that I think none, save myself, suspected Miss Howard : certainly not any of the immediate family : but there were whispers in the town as to Dr. Goring, though I am sure he did not merit them. People hinted at the windfall that insurance money was to him, and his practice, for the moment, fell off considerably. None knew, I daresay none ever will know, the truth of this mysterious crime ; it happened in silence and secrecy, and so it remains buried. Sometimes, in my dreams, I see Miss Howard standing, barefooted, by a bed-side, on which lies a happy wife, sleeping calmly. I see her leaning over a small table, with a phial in her hand, and I see her drop something from it into a glass which stands there. Then I see her steal away with breathless caution, and glide down the stairs in silence, till she comes to a room where many bottles and jars, on shelves, and chemical tubes, lie about, and I see her mount a chair softly, and put that phial into its place in a corner, and then she creeps back again to a large sitting-room close by, closes the door with cat-like stillness, thrusts her feet into her shoes, sits down and takes up some work. And I have noted the form of Dr. Goring hovering near, and sometimes he seems to look on approvingly through all ; then I notice that he is stone-blind, and cannot see as I do. And I awake, shivering and comfortless, and cry out with horror and pain, as I did that fearful morning when I received Mary Goring's letter, and then I remember that it is all a dream and that I am very foolish.

But I know one thing : and I will speak out my sentiments, and people may call me an old maid for them if they will. If I had the handling of these women-serpents, these single females, who come envying and trying to destroy the wedded happiness which they have never been asked to share, I would cause them to be paraded through the town on a market day, in a white garment, according to the former custom of doing penance, and then have them privately whipped. For when they insinuate their treacherous arts between man and wife, they are deliberately flying in the face of a divine command : "THOSE WHOM GOD HATH JOINED TOGETHER, LET NOT MAN PUT ASUNDER."

CHAPTER XXV.

A SECRET MARRIAGE.

AUNT COPP had once prophesied that Hester's life would be full of business and care, and it really seemed like it. They had but just got Captain Copp's wedding over, when a letter arrived from Mr. Halliwell at Chelson, saying that his wife (who had long been in a poor state of health) was worse than usual, and begging Hester to go there.

"What is to be done, Lucy?"

"I do not see how you can refuse to go," was Lucy's reply. "Poor Alfred! what trouble and worry he has! And the very last man formed by nature for a life of care."

"Don't say that, Lucy," remonstrated Hester; "to us he seemed so, but, rely upon it, the back is always fitted to the burden. It may be that had Alfred been more favourably circumstanced, he would have led a life of dreamy, useless indolence—have kept a curate to do the work, and shuffle off action and responsibility from himself."

Hester wrote an answer, and started for Chelson on the following Monday. The rail conveyed her thither in a few hours, and she got out on to the platform. She was looking out for her trunk when a boy who appeared to be one of the employed, and was busy with the porters, ran up to her :

"If you please, are you Aunt Hester?"

She was taken by surprise. Could it be that one of her brother's boys was working at the railway station? "Who are you?" she asked.

"I am Sam, Aunt Hester. Next to Tom. Shall I see to your luggage?"

"Yes, my dear. I will walk on."

"The omnibus will go round the town directly. Papa told me to put you in it."

But Hester preferred to walk, Sam calling after her to ask if she knew her way. She remembered it quite well, reached the house, and knocked. The door was opened by a flaunty-looking servant.

with open sleeves and a piece of round white lace stuck on the back of her head. Hester wondered if she called it a cap.

"Is Mr. Halliwell at home?"

"Mr. Halliwell!" was the answer. "What, the parson?"

"Yes. The Reverend Mr. Halliwell. Is he at home?"

"He don't live here, mum. He lives at the Vicarage."

"At the Vicarage!" Hester repeated in her surprise.

"Yes, he do," was the girl's answer. "He have moved into it, out of here, this two years."

Hester turned towards the Vicarage, with an oppressed feeling at her heart. To think that they should have gone back to that terrible place, where, as Mabel had once observed to her, the wet ran down the walls and the odours made her ill. Her brother was standing at the churchyard steps. Strangely altered; bowed, and grey and broken! in appearance an old man, though not yet fifty.

"Are you walking, Hester?" he exclaimed. "I told Samuel to put you into the omnibus."

"My legs were cramped with the journey," she replied, as he took her hand. "How is Mabel?"

"Better to-day. It is the thought of your coming. I fear, Hester, we shall lose her."

"Alfred," she exclaimed, almost passionately, "what brings you back, living at this unwholesome place?"

"There was no help for it," he sadly said. "Expenses were so heavy upon me, I was unable to pay rent."

Unconsciously Hester had halted, leaning with her elbow on the low gate of the churchyard. Her heart was full. "I did not know Samuel," she observed.

"I dare say not. He was a little chap in petticoats, I suppose, when you were last here."

"I mean I never should have looked out for him as one of the railway servants. I do not speak in any spirit of false pride, Alfred, but it vexed me to see him there, the son of a clergyman."

"I cannot do better," replied Mr. Halliwell. "Perhaps in time something may turn up. I strove to keep my boys to occupations only fitted for gentlemen. I was in hopes, great hopes, of sending George to college; in a subordinate capacity of course, what we call a servitor; and I kept him at home to his reading and his classics. But one cannot confine boys of seventeen in-doors, and always have an eye over them. I am obliged to be out much, and it seems George used to get out. He made acquaintance with expensive companions, they led him into debt and it nearly ruined me."

"Debt which you had to pay?" asked Hester.

"Yes. It was almost sixty pounds. I thought every stick and stone we had must have been sold. But they gave me time, and are giving it me still."

"And where's George now?"

"That's the worst part of the business. It is that," he added, lowering his voice, "which has brought down his mother. He had as good a heart, poor fellow, as ever breathed, and when he saw the embarrassment his imprudent thoughtlessness caused, he started off, saying he would no longer be a source of grief to us, and went to sea."

"To what part of the world? When did you hear from him?" reiterated Hester.

"Never since," he whispered, turning away his face, so that Hester could not see it.

"Why, can that be Sam! wheeling down my luggage himself!" uttered Hester.

Mr. Halliwell looked towards the advancing truck. "Yes, it is Samuel," he quietly said, not seeming to feel the affair in the least.

"Samuel, how could you think of doing such a thing!" Hester exclaimed when he came up. "I told you to let the omnibus bring my boxes."

"The omnibus would have charged you a shilling, Aunt Hester," returned the boy, looking at her with a good-humoured smile on his bright face: "sixpence for the trunk, though it is small, and sixpence for the bandbox. It has not hurt me."

"Well, Sam, as you have done it, and it can't be helped, there's the shilling for you."

"Oh no, indeed, Aunt Hester, I did not do it to get the shilling for myself. That would be cheating the Company; but, of course, as you are my aunt, I could bring them free if I liked. I will not take it, thank you."

"Very well," said Hester, admiring the lad in her heart. "If young porters are too proud to accept shillings, I cannot help it."

"Better for him to be at this honest employment, though he is the descendant of a race of gentlemen, if it keeps him out of mischief, than go wrong through idleness, as George did," whispered Mr. Halliwell to his sister.

"Yes, yes, Alfred, it is better. What is Tom doing?"

"Thomas is in his Uncle Zink's office."

"Articled?"

"Only as a clerk," sighed Mr. Halliwell. "He gets a trifle a-week. We cannot place boys out as gentlemen, Hester, without premium, nowadays, and I have not got it to pay."

At the door of the Vicarage stood Emma and Annie, both lady-like girls, and one of them, Emma, extremely pretty. Though only attired in cheap alpaca dresses, they looked like the daughters of a gentleman. Archibald, the youngest child, was peeping out of the parlour.

"Now, guess which is which," said Mr. Halliwell.

Hester looked at the smiling, blushing countenances of the two young ladies, and guessed wrongly. "That is Annie," she said,

pointing to the pretty one, with the rich colour and merry eyes. Mr. Halliwell laughed.

"That is Emma. Lead your aunt upstairs to your mamma, children."

Hester followed them to Mrs. Halliwell's bed-chamber, the very room from which she had stolen the ornamental bands that Sacrament Sunday so long ago, and the occurrence came forcibly to her mind as she crossed the threshold and saw the dressing-table whence she had taken them. The room looked very nice, the curtains, sheets and dressing-cloths snowy white. Mrs. Halliwell was sitting up in bed, sewing, her thin face as white as the linen.

"Mamma, here is Aunt Hester."

The pink hectic flushed into her face then, and her trembling hands let fall the work. Hester leaned over the bed and kissed her. "You look poorly, Mabel," she said, "but I have come to cure you."

"You have come to see me die," she whispered; and there was a resigned expression in her face which Hester had never before seen in it.

Hester took off her shawl and bonnet and sat down by her, and the two girls left the room, to get tea ready, by their mother's orders.

"How have you managed to get into this weak state?" enquired Hester.

Mrs. Halliwell did not answer immediately, but lay with her handkerchief pressed to her face; Hester thought to hide the tears.

"It has come on by degrees," she said: "I have had *so much* to bear. But I am not grumbling as I used to do," she hastily added, as an earnest, happy expression flitted over her countenance. "Oh Hester! how I could have gone on for all those years without **LIGHT** coming to me, I cannot tell. Do you remember how I would abuse and despise Alfred for that welcoming of trouble, that resigned, *trusting* spirit of his?"

Hester nodded.

"But it came to me also in God's own good time. I see things clearly now; I did not then. Trials, troubles as we call them, are sent to us in mercy, and, accordingly as they are received, they are to us miseries or blessings. Alfred, in his submissive, trustful spirit, made them the former; I murmured and rebelled. But, as I say, light has come to me; and I can look back now on my life of care, and truthfully say I would not change its remembrance for that of an easier one."

"Then you are happy, Mabel?"

"Quite happy," she answered, with a movement of the hands which spoke perfect content. "When the conviction first stole upon me that I was declining, I could not have said so, on account of my children. For myself I had no regrets, for I had found my Saviour; but oh! to leave my children! To feel that I was going to be taken

to a heavenly home, and that they—perhaps one; perhaps two; more; how could I tell? might never come to it! that no mother would henceforth be with them, to be their guide, and whisper a warning, a word in season, or to pray for them! and then a remorse came to me: that when they were young I might have done so much more than I did do, to turn their hearts and hopes heavenward. But all that anguish has passed—save for one of them—and I am content to leave them in the hands of HIM who has drawn me to Him, and will, I surely trust, in due course, draw them also.”

“How long have you been ill?” enquired Hester.

“It is a long, long time since I felt strong, but I have been palpably declining nearly two years. There is not much the matter with me, even now, beyond want of strength.”

“Have you a good appetite?”

“Not now, and it has been very dainty throughout. Delicacies, niceties, I could have eaten; indeed I used to crave for them with an intense longing; fowl, and tender cuts out of a large joint of meat, and strong beer, and similar things. But of course we could not procure them, and our common food I was unable to eat. I expect that has been the chief cause of my decline, a want of proper nourishment. Since it has been known that I am seriously ill, every one is very kind, sending me jellies and wine and tempting bits from their own table, but the craving for them is gone and they do me no good. Did Alfred tell you about George?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, if I could but see him! if I could but know where he is! if I could but have him with me for an hour, here, by my bedside, and charge him to struggle through life, bearing one end in view—to come to me *up there*—it seems that I could die in peace!”

She had pointed her hand to the sky as she spoke, and Hester could not trust her voice to speak just then.

“Two years,” she continued, “two whole years and never to have heard of him! whether he is dead or alive, whether he is in distress; in slavery; whether he is with companions that will lead him into all evil! Oh Hester! and he was my first-born, my dearest child.”

“He is in God’s hands,” whispered Hester. “And, Mabel, so are your cares.”

“I know it, I know it. But for that knowledge I scarcely think I could bear the care for him which presses on me. Oh, George! my boy, my boy! I often wish, Hester, he had gone before me, a child, as poor David did.”

“And so old Betty is dead,” observed Hester, by way of diverting Mabel’s thoughts.

“Betty is dead. There lies another of my regrets: I never appreciated her as I ought. She had so hard a life here, yet I made little effort to smooth things for her, but too often found fault and grumbled. She stopped with us, good faithful creature, as long as

she could stop, faring hard and never asking for her wages. She is better off now. Hester, tell me all the particulars about your ill-fated sister, Mrs. Goring. Alfred and I cannot understand her death yet."

"I will tell you to-morrow, Mabel, not this evening. It is a long tale. Were you not surprised at Amy's marriage?"

Mrs. Halliwell could not help smiling. "Indeed we were surprised at both of them. At him for choosing Amy, so meek and retiring, and at her for putting up with a husband who had a wooden leg. I do not see why they should not be very happy. The worst is Mrs. Copp's displeasure. Do you think she will ever be reconciled?"

"She is reconciled already," laughed Hester. "Have you not heard it from Amy? She went off to Liverpool in the height of displeasure, but, before the Captain and Amy had been at home a fortnight, who should arrive there but Aunt Copp, with two chests of linen as a present and a silver tea-pot."

"Then she is with them now?"

"And no doubt will be till Christmas," added Hester.

"Mamma," said Annie, looking in, "tea is ready. Are we to bring Aunt Hester's up with yours, or will she come down into the parlour?"

"Bring it up," said Hester.

"No, no," interrupted Mrs. Halliwell. "I must not monopolise you entirely; what would Alfred say? Go down and have your tea with him, and come up to me again afterwards."

Before Hester had been many days at the Vicarage, it struck her that the two girls had some secret between them. Upon going into a room she more than once surprised them in a whispered conversation, and at the sight of her they had started from each other like detected criminals, their faces turned to crimson. However, she attached little importance to it, imagining it to be some girlish secret. They had but scant leisure. Since Betty died, Mr. and Mrs. Halliwell had kept no regular servant; a woman went for three or four hours a-day to do the rough part of the household work, and Emma and Annie did the rest. All their spare time was occupied in crochet-work, which they did to sell. A shop at Camley (an aristocratic village three miles off) took it from them, and they earned a good bit of money at it between them, some weeks as much as eight or ten shillings. But they did not have it regularly, there was so much competition for that sort of work.

On the Wednesday week after Hester got there, she was sitting in Mrs. Halliwell's room when Annie came in to ask something about the dinner.

"Where's Emma?" inquired Mrs. Halliwell.

"She is gone to Camley, mamma."

"To Camley! My dear, why does she not say when she is going?"

Your aunt would have liked the walk with her, this fine morning. And why is it always Emma who goes to Camley? You should take it in turns, Annie. You ought to walk sometimes, confined as you are in-doors so much."

Annie did not answer, but Hester noticed a very vivid blush rise to her face as she left the room hastily.

"It is a fine morning," observed Hester, "for so late in the year."

"I am sure a walk would do you good, Hester. If you put on your bonnet now you will catch up Emma."

"I should not like to leave you for so long," said Hester.

"Oh, that's nonsense," returned Mabel, with a touch of her old, hasty manner. "You will be back in a couple of hours, and I shall not run away the while. Tell Emma, when you catch her up, that I do not approve of her always being the one to go to Camley and leaving poor Annie at home."

Hester was tempted to the walk, for, excepting to the church on Sunday, she had not been out since she arrived and she felt that she wanted air. So she departed, and walked fast to overtake Emma; but she could not see her, and at length reached Camley. The shop, where she expected her niece to be was readily found, and she entered it: but they said that Miss Halliwell had been and gone, nearly a quarter of an hour.

"How in the world can we have missed each other?" thought Hester. However, it was of no use deliberating and streaming about Camley; the only thing was to make the best of her way home again.

Accordingly, she turned back; but, in passing along the village, her eyes happened to wander to the windows over an opposite shop, where grocery, chandlery, brooms, brushes and other miscellaneous articles were sold. Hester stopped involuntarily, for surely she saw Emma Halliwell's side face at that upstairs window! Though it was but for a moment, for the face went back behind the folds of the crimson curtain. Hester crossed the street, intending to knock at the private door and ask for her. But the thought that it might not be Emma caused her to waver: whoever it was, wore no bonnet and seemed to be quite at home: she remembered also that her nieces had said they had no acquaintance in Camley. So Hester passed on, and reached home. Emma had not returned. Hester said nothing, only that she had missed her. A full hour afterwards she saw her coming down the churchyard steps hurriedly, her face the colour of a peony. Hester ran and opened the door.

"Emma, you have been a long time," she remarked.

"The patterns were not ready," was Emma's prompt answer. "I had to wait. I thought they were going to keep me in the shop till night."

"There's something wrong here," thought Hester to herself. But she said nothing then: it was not a fitting opportunity.

In the afternoon the equipage of the Reverend George Dewisson came prancing up to the churchyard steps, and the Reverend George alighted from it, walked down them and knocked at the Vicarage door. A rare honour; for since his induction to that rich living, he had grown more stiff and unsociable than ever. The Earl of Seaford had died within two years of his appointment to it, and the Reverend George had then married. His wife was a lady in her own right; old, and grand and sour; she was one of five sisters, who were all as poor as the poorest mouse in St. Paul's Church, but he had been caught by the title and had married her.

Mr. Halliwell and his sister received him, and in the course of conversation the former remarked that Lady Lavinia never came now to see Mrs. Halliwell.

"There are—aw" (the Reverend George had talked in a constrained manner when he was curate, and pomposity was added to it now)—"certain rules of society, which—aw—Lady Lavinia, from her position, is especially obliged not to—aw—transgress. She requested me to state, should the subject be led to by you, that she intended no disrespect to—aw—*Mrs. Halliwell*, by abstaining from calling."

The words, and the peculiar stress upon his wife's name, puzzled Mr. Halliwell.

"But when—aw—a young lady (as, of course, a clergyman's daughter must be considered, be her pecuniary circumstances ever so unfavourable) gives herself up—or, I may say, in this case, give themselves up, to—aw—low company; to, in short, an appearance of—aw—bad conduct, it cannot be expected that Lady Lavinia can—aw—countenance the family."

Hester blushed for his bad feeling and vulgar words. If ever the temptation was strong upon her to tell the world how he had obtained his living, it was then. But she sat silent.

Mr. Halliwell's mouth opened with amazement. "Do you allude to my daughters?" he enquired.

"I am obliged to say I do. To—aw—the elder one especially."

"Why, what have they done?" he asked.

"Report says, that they—at least—aw—one of them, is upon familiar terms, in—aw—a very familiar sense of the word indeed—with a man who lives at Camley. Some low musical fellow of the name of Lipscome, who gets his living by—aw—fiddling and such things."

Hester's heart went pit-a-pat against her side, for she remembered the vision of Emma's head that very morning, and her deliberate untruth afterwards. She listened to the further particulars, rumours, he called them, entered into by Mr. Dewisson; and when that gentleman left she laid her hand on her brother to detain him (for he was hastening nervously into the room where the two girls were seated at their crochet) and spoke calmly.

"There must be some mistake in this, Alfred. Leave me to

penetrate it. The children will be confused and alarmed if you question them. You are looking now white with apprehension. Go out on your afternoon parish round; and, above all, say nothing to Mabel."

Hester took her knitting into the other parlour and sat down by her nieces, who had their heads together, as usual, whispering.

"Which of you two young ladies is it," she began in a careless tone, "who is upon intimate terms with Lipscome, the music-master?"

Annie gave a half scream, looked at Emma, and began to tremble violently. She was by far the more excitable and the more sensitive of the two. Emma bent her head lower over her work, and her very neck grew scarlet. Neither spoke.

"Annie," said her aunt, thinking she would question the one whom she suspected to be the least guilty, "are you upon familiar terms of friendship with this Mr. Lipscome?"

She burst into tears. "No," she sobbed, "indeed I am not. I have seen but little of him."

"Have you not occasionally gone to his lodgings—where he lives alone? That is very pretty, I think, for a young lady."

"I have never been inside his door," cried Annie, earnestly. "It is not my fault."

"What is not your fault?"

"Good gracious, Aunt," interrupted Emma testily, "if we have spoken, once in a way, with Mr. Lipscome, where's the harm of it? Papa and mamma would like to keep us curbed up, like mice in a trap. Don't make yourself such a simpleton, Annie: there's nothing for *you* to sob over."

"There is a great deal of harm," returned Hester in stern tones, for the girl's careless words provoked her. "A communication has been made to your father that you have acted so as to raise serious reports against your fair fame. It is not possible that you, a clergyman's daughter, carefully brought up, can have conducted yourself so as to deserve them."

"Oh, Emma," implored Annie, in deep agitation, "tell the truth. You know it cannot be hidden always. Tell Aunt Hester: perhaps she will break it to papa."

Hester's flesh was creeping all over: she hardly knew what dreadful thing to fear. It did not creep less at Emma's next words.

"*Will* you stand between me and papa's anger, Aunt Hester?" I know it is very bad, but it is done."

"What is done?" breathed Hester, hardly able to get the words from her dry lips.

"I am married," she whispered.

(To be continued.)

WITH THE NIGHTINGALES AT THE VICARAGE.

OUR parish is not one that presents much striking variety of scenery, though it is rich here and there in by-ways, in umbrageous, greeny nooks, and its hedgerows are delightful. Not a right-of-way through the smallest farm but you come on "nestling places green, for poets made," as Leigh Hunt has it, in little strips of coppice or woodland, that run like a rich trimming round a plain, solid dress of fairest colours.

One little dell we have in our eye, where all is so nicely bright, yet shaded, that you might fancy naiads or sylphs at play among the lush leafage; where, while the ear is charmed with the soft ripple of water, hardly distinguishable from the whispering of the leaves, you can look through the sheltering screen at the distant water-mill—the only thing that suggests human activity within eye-range, and by contrast seems to add to the sense of repose, serenity and retirement.

On the boundaries of our parish, to the east and to the west, there are low, swelling hills crested with trees nicely dotted in; and along the slopes of one of these lies a wood, in which it is my delight to stroll or to lie and realise at mid-day the sense of that Pan-like silence which the ancients fabled to haunt the noon-day woods when Pan was abroad.

In the centre of our district the ground is flat, but fertile; and the meadows are lush, and, in the season, bright with buttercups and cowslips.

So far as respects tree-planting the Vicarage is, as perhaps it ought to be, the bright spot of the parish. Art and nature have combined to beautify it. In former days some of the incumbents were great arboriculturists, and the present vicar rejoices in their labours and has added worthily his own quota to theirs. You might wander a good way before you came on grounds where, in the words of good old George Herbert, you would find more riches in little room.

The house, somewhat low and angular, lies as it were in the corner of a miniature park; trellised creepers, climbing roses, and, most notable of all, a lovely magnolia-tree, cover the walls and relieve the harshness of outline, seen from whatever point of view; and it gathers its little lawns and rosaries and flower-beds close about it, half-way round it, with shrubberies skirting the outline of these, bright with soft, feathery sumachs, ornamental pines of many kinds—the *Glaucus* pine among them, with its frosty fringes, peculiarly beautiful—the Judas tree, the Glastonbury thorn, so rich and rare, or something very closely allied to it, with spikes on the branches an inch and a quarter long, and hedges of varicoloured rhododendrons.

This forms a kind of inner inclosure or sylvan sanctum, through

which the farther ground opens up to you in delightful vistas as you look or go from point to point ; and from this inner sanctum, at any point, you step at once into the little park of which I have spoken.

On the other side of the road, quite separated from this, lies the main vegetable and fruit garden, with lofty hedges and stone walls for wall-fruit all round it ; save, indeed, on the far side, where it gives into a paddock more useful and less ornamental than the park, with which we are more particularly concerned, though it too has some fine trees around it, and one or two within it, on the strong branches of which swings can be placed for the children at merry-making or school-treat.

Round the extreme limit of the park are stately trees of many kinds : beeches, smooth and velvety of bole, running straight up, "like the mast of some great ammiral ;" oaks of great antiquity ; chestnuts in the early summer, with their creamy pyramids of blossom ; a horn-beam or two—rare in this quarter—and some splendid elms, mixed with lilacs, and "laburnums, dropping wells of fire" in their season ; hop-elms, a cedar or two, and a few lime-trees, with no end of lower shrubby wood—red-thorns, black-thorns, white-thorns, etc. etc.

Dotted into the park itself, with the most artistic regard to points of view, are copper-beeches, pollard oaks, with sweeping branches, tent-like, broad, umbrageous, walnut-trees, birches—graceful ladies-of-the-wood—and a few mountain-ashes—"Oh, rowan tree ; oh, rowan tree, thou'lt aye be dear to me !" And from whatever part of this boundary you may look, you cannot but admire the art shown in so disposing the trees that the limits of the little park on the other side seem to be indefinite and distant.

This park abounds with birds, for the vicar is a great bird-lover as well as tree-lover, and has even been heard to say, when practical-minded persons have told him of the fruit the birds would eat or destroy, that he would rather be without the fruit than lose the music of the birds, which make him delightful concert the live-long day, and have even relieved and sweetened to him weary hours of night.

It would seem as though the birds knew it, for they build in the most exposed places here, where one can stand and look on the callow young ones in the nest, raising and opening little beaks as you "tweet, 'tweet" to them and put the finger near ; or into the deep, dark, liquid eyes of the mother-bird, as she sits brooding over eggs or young ones.

On one occasion a boy had intruded, found out and carried off one of these nests. The vicar's daughter, passing that way, saw the mother-bird sitting disconsolately on the tree from which the nest had gone. The culprit was speedily found (for all things are soon known here, and nothing can long be hid), followed and compelled to bring back the nest with its little family, and put it in exactly where it was before in the branch ; and the disconsolate mother was comforted, and reared that brood there to maturity.

Our vicar's delight in his flowers, trees and birds, as indicating a freshness of feeling and capability of youthful joyance, in spite of sad turns of ill-health, is beautiful to see. The park is a haunt of nightingales, which discourse the sweetest music all through the summer night ; and this is an additional delight and source of pride to our vicar, who in no way wishes to keep all his good things to himself.

One evening in the end of May last, we went, full of expectation, to listen to the nightingales. A crescent moon hung in the silver-blue sky and shed a soft silvery lustre around, strong enough to make a pleasant light, yet not strong enough to cast shadows too deep to be eerie. In a little arbour we sat waiting, and what is waited for is invariably long in coming. But also it is true, and how delightful 'tis that 'tis also true, in the words of the French proverb, that "all things come to him that can wait."

We waited, beguiling the time in talk of many things—literature, art and music : and at length the music of the nightingale at once crowned and silenced our talk. The shadows of the trees, like finer ghosts of themselves, lay lengthened on the grass. The leaves of the lime and the poplar gently fluttered, even when there seemed no breeze to stir them, and an almost inaudible murmur appeared to steal across the thick, long grass, here and there cluster-starred with marguerites, that faintly wavered in the moonlight, in the pauses of that song.

The pauses grew shorter and shorter as we sat and listened. At first there was more of a complaining, plaintive air, varied only now and then with trills, gurgles, penetrating rolls and half-whistles (we cannot describe that indescribable music, though its subtly pert-nacious, penetrating sweetness is found in no whistle). Gradually the tones grew deeper, fuller, richer, as though the mere act of singing had brought its own comfort ; nay, its own delight—the triumphant, mellow, full tones predominated ; the shower of song fell on our ears like sweet rain on the wastes of the desert.

We at length arose and proceeded down the crescent path that bounds the park, till we stood close to the tree from which the music came, actually touching its leaves. Still, the bird was so rapt in its song that it did not perceive us, or, perceiving us, was so rapt in its delight that human presences were indifferent to it—or, it may be (who knows ?) were even stimulating, as the sense of a sympathetic audience to a great *prima donna*.

And doubtless not far off "the music of the moon slept in the plain eggs of the nightingale," as the poet sings ; and that was inspiration too ; for the song we have is ever but the herald of songs to come, and an aid to the brooding love that is active to make them come. With the nightingale, as with the human heart, it sings when it labours to prepare and to perfect the life which shall enjoy the love that it feels within, throbbing and prophetic.

Still, the music flowed, gathered, swelled ; now piercing clear ; now

lowly plaintive ; again, as if calling some loved one who lingered afar ; again, as though that loved one were near—were near. Those pipings and jug-jug-jugs how impossible it is to reproduce them, however clearly recalled ; and it seemed that, instead of satiating, they grew ever more sweet and intense to ear and heart. We stood—none of us knew how long—close to that sweet heart of minstrelsy ; fearless, unseen of us, yet doubtless seeing us ; and as we were moved more and more, so more and more the music seemed to grow, and swell and quiveringly vibrate, and deepen and flood all the moonlit fields and meadows round about. How the other birds can sleep soundly in their nests is indeed a wonder !

When at last we turned and bade our friends good-night, it seemed that the nightingale's music followed us for a mile or more through the scented sweetness of the night ; and that, as at last it grew faint the notes of other nightingales came faintly on the ear from far, and more distinctly nearer to us, as though nightingales were sheltered in familiar spots close to our own abode, where before we had never guessed them to be. Or is it that the delighted ear is the only truly prepared ear for kindred harmonies ?

ALEXANDER H. JAPP.



THE WIND'S MESSAGE.

THIS June wind that softly blows,
Over dreaming pastures goes
Till it finds a certain Rose.

Happy breeze ! for you may go
Where I dare not pass, you know
You may kiss her brow of snow.

You may shake rose-petals fair
On the plaits of golden hair
And the sweet arms white and bare

You may stroke her head of gold,
And her white gown's dainty fold,
As I used to do of old.

You may tell—ah, tell her, pray !
All she cannot hear me say
Now I am so far away.

Tell her you have touched and known
Singing lips that miss her own.
Say I love her—her alone !

E. NESBIT.

THREE OFFERS.

I.

"MAB, papa wants you. In the study." I threw down my mallet on the smooth lawn—those were the days of croquet, when tennis was an unknown game—and looked questioningly, with an anxious glance, at Tom, my brother, who brought this unexpected and unwelcome summons.

"What is the matter, Tom?" I asked. "Did he say why he wanted me?"

"Oh, a lecture of some sort, I suppose!" returned Tom with impatient disgust. "You stood on one leg in church last night, or turned in your toes as you came in to breakfast!"

Tom was unsympathetic; he thrust his hands deep into his pockets and sauntered away. But the girls, their faces full of commiseration, came from every corner of the lawn towards me. Their portentous faces and portentous tones were comforting but not inspiring.

"Has papa sent for you, Mab?"

"Why does he want you?"

"You broke a pot in the conservatory, Mab, perhaps it's that."

"Poor Mab! I saw him looking at you at breakfast this morning in a peculiar way. And your collar was frightfully askew."

"Is it straight now?" I asked, looking anxiously from one to another of the sympathetic group.

"Yes; but your dress is torn. Here's a pin; pin it up beneath the sash. Oh, and what a green stain there is on your flounce!"

I moved towards the house, followed by many warnings and eager-voiced injunctions.

"Your hair's untidy, Mab. Can't you smooth it?"

"Your sash has come untied."

"Mab, your hands are grubby. Remember to keep your hands behind you."

I entered the house and went through the hall towards the "study," the pleasant, sunny back room, where my step-father studied the innumerable faults of his step-family, and the best methods of correction and prevention. I was just seventeen, and, in some respects, young for my years; my heart was beating very fast as I paused at the study door. With two hot little hands I smoothed back my hair; I looked down ruefully at my stained print gown. Then I gently tapped.

"Come in," answered my step-father's smooth, mellow voice; and I meekly entered.

My father was not alone. Mabel Campion, our distant cousin, my father's ward, sat in a low chair near him. She was a tall, graceful, very gentle girl of twenty; her elbow resting on her knee, her chin upon her hand, she sat looking up at her guardian with a reverential glance. As I entered she blushed, looked doubtfully at me, then doubtfully but very meekly at my step-father, as though awaiting his commands.

"Yes; I will ask you to leave us," he said, smiling at her—smiling in a well-pleased way, as he never smiled at us.

She smiled too—a faint, sweet, shy little smile. She rose from her chair and moved quietly away, softly closing the door behind her. I and my step-father were left alone.

The benign smile with which he had followed Mabel lingered for a minute about his smooth, clean-shaven lips, and during that minute he ignored my presence. Then, in a slow way, he altered his attitude, put his elbows, clad in spotless broadcloth, on the arms of his study chair, let his finger-tips meet, and let his brown eyes rest critically on me.

No doubt I contrasted unfavourably with Mabel. My pink print dress was too short for me; here and there, in patches, the pink had faded into white; an unsightly green stain disfigured the flounce in front. My hands were sun-browned and, as the girls had warned me, "grubby." My face was freckled, my fair hair disordered. I was keenly conscious of my defects; and in my humility I stood in the limpest of attitudes, apologising for my existence by an extremity of embarrassment.

"Perhaps you can find a seat, Mabel," said my step-father in his mild level voice. No one but him ever called me "Mabel;" to the rest of the world I was "Mab." But my step-father never descended to the frivolity of pet-names.

I found a seat—a seat in a distant part of the room, behind the knee-hole writing-table. But my step-father indicated a straight-backed chair which stood just opposite his own, and I returned reluctantly but meekly and sat facing him.

"I wish to speak to you, Mabel."

"Yes, papa."

"You are breathless, my dear. I am in no hurry. I will wait for you to compose yourself."

I coloured guiltily. My heart was fluttering in a very breathless way indeed. To strive to "compose" myself, whilst my step-father sat watching me, was a hopeless task; I knew it was hopeless; every effort only deferred the desired effect. I crossed my feet, then hastily uncrossed them. I pushed back my hair, then folded my hands and tried to look unconscious that my hair was rough.

And my step-father all the time sat motionless. Now and then, at intervals, his finger-tips tapped one another softly; but that was the only sign of impatience that he made. His brown eyes regarded me

with a critical but forbearing glance ; his large, pale, clean-shaven face wore an expression of conscious gentleness and patience.

"I have two very important pieces of news to break to you, my dear. But I have no wish to excite you. Self-control, Mabel, is one of those elementary virtues without which no character worthy of admiration or esteem can be built. Your poor dear mamma—I do not wish to blame her"—my step-father broke off and sighed indulgently—"I do not wish to blame her for your bringing-up; the wisest of us sometimes err, and her errors must be pardoned however much we must regret them. For your sake I must regret them—deplore them. She undervalued those habits of self-control which, inculcated early, are the most helpful factors in producing a womanly character—such a character as—as, for instance, our Cousin Mabel's, strong yet submissive, self-reliant yet dependent, dignified yet meek."

My step-father's glance wandered away from me; he smiled benignly, reflecting on virtues which I had not.

"If I had had the supervision of your very early education," he sighed after a minute, "you and your sisters, Mabel, would have learnt in the nursery, in early babyhood, those habits which you now find it well-nigh impossible to learn. Your mind is fussily-strung, my dear—excuse the expression. You have no mental tranquillity. Even at this moment you are excited and impatient. I have, as I say, two important pieces of news to break to you; but I will wait for five minutes or so, until you have composed yourself a little and cease to fidget in that nervous manner."

Perhaps the minutes that passed before my step-father again addressed me were in actual number only five; I know that they seemed like thirty.

"You are seventeen, Mabel, if I remember correctly," he said at last, breaking the silence; "seventeen, two months and five days. Correct me if I am not exact."

"Yes, papa. I was seventeen on the first of May."

"Young!—young," he mused, regarding me with gentle disfavour. But your mother was younger when she married first. Mabel, my love, have you ever thought much upon the subject of—of—well, I may say of marriage, Mabel?"

The question was confusing. "I—I don't know, papa," I stammered.

"You don't know?" he repeated tolerantly, with faint, very faint, amusement. "That is a very youthful answer. You are old enough, at all events, to have realised that it would be desirable that some of you should marry. Your poor dear mother brought me a large and expensive family; and although I have striven to stand in the place of a father to you all, and although I flatter myself that my devotion and patience have been even more than parental, yet—yet my purse is but slender, Mabel, and it will certainly be expedient that some of you, at least, shall marry."

"Y—yes," I answered, doubtfully and vaguely.

"I shall be glad if you will tell me, my dear, if you have any—partiality—respect, esteem—for any person in particular?"

I gasped. I did not laugh, though my thoughts flashed forwards to the merry time I should presently enjoy when the study door should have closed behind me, and, out of my step-father's earshot, the girls grouped in easy but inelegant attitudes around me, I should repeat this speech dramatically to an appreciative mirthful audience. By-and-bye my brilliancy would be applauded. For the present, I was dumb, and my dumbness, no doubt, seemed foolish to my step-parent, whom words never failed.

"I believe I asked you a question, Mabel," he observed, with an air of almost pious patience.

"Y—yes, papa."

"I am waiting, my dear, for your answer."

He might wait for ever. I was meek in my step-father's presence; I answered him in a small voice; I never dared to contradict him—but in a silent way I could be obstinate. Did he expect me to tell him the secret which was mine, my own, unshared, which even the girls did not guess and never should guess! Had he guessed it?—the thought made my heart stand still; I forgot my fear of him and glanced sharply and suspiciously into his round white face.

"Our young neighbour at the Cedars has been often here of late."

"You mean Ned?" I interrogated in a careless tone. I had thought I possessed some dramatic talent, but that careless tone cost me a gigantic effort, and, after all the effort, was discernible. I knew I blushed. I grew hot, then cold.

"I mean Edward Barnet—yes. As I observed, he has been often here of late."

"He always comes when he's at home," I explained, hastily. "He always did. He comes because he has nothing else to do. He—he likes to come."

"Certainly. I have no wish to dispute that statement. My dear Mabel, you are blushing—a graceful habit for some complexions; your blushes, my dear, remind one a little too much of the peony. May I conclude, my love, that there is some attachment, some partiality on your side for Mr. Barnet?"

"We all like him," I replied, doggedly, emphatically, with a sort of eager indifference. "Of course we like him—we are neighbours—and—and we have always known each other."

"Friendship is the very best basis for a yet warmer feeling," replied my step-father in a satisfied tone. "Mabel, Mr. Barnet called on me last night to ask me to allow him to speak to you concerning—concerning this subject —"

"This subject?" I repeated, in a bewildered way.

"He tells me he is in love with you. He wishes to ask you to be his wife."

I think I had forgotten that I was shy and frightened ; I had risen from my chair and gone to the window, escaping from that calm, mild, steady glance, that contemplated my rosy cheeks and smiling lips and the happy light that I knew was shining in my eyes.

"To ask me ?" I repeated. "Me ?—me ? Me—to be his wife !"

"Mabel, if you will be good enough to return to your seat, we can perhaps discuss this question quietly."

"Papa, it is not true ! There is some mistake."

"Please sit down, Mabel. Allow me to finish what I was saying."

Like one in a dream I came back to my seat ; the ground as I moved surely did not touch my feet ! I trod on air. Ned loved me ! —Ned loved me !—the bees were humming those three little words outside the window ; the birds were twittering the same delicious truth from every tree. Ned loved me !—and when had I not loved Ned ?

"Did he *really* say that ?—really ?—you're not imagining it ?" I questioned, awe of my step-father entirely lost in a stronger feeling.

"You are exciting yourself, Mabel. It is much to be regretted that your poor dear mother's fussy disposition has been inherited by so many of her children ! You in particular, Mabel, have a tendency on the slightest provocation to become hysterical."

"I don't think so, papa."

The contradiction was unlooked-for ; my step-father's brown eyes grew rounder and bigger, their glance of mild surprise and displeasure should have crushed me completely—but I met the glance and smiled back contentedly, unabashed.

"I will confess, my dear, that Mr. Barnet's choice has astonished me. We will not discuss his taste. You are young, and possibly will improve. The discipline of married life will no doubt cure many of those faults which I deplore in you. As Mr. Barnet is twenty-five years of age, old enough to guide his own actions, I did not feel it to be my duty to save him from what, if I regard the matter impartially, I regret to say that I consider a mistake. He will doubtless repent of his marriage—but that is his own affair. I have won his gratitude by giving my cordial consent to his addressing you. I have promised to sanction the engagement —"

For once the smooth, monotonous voice was like sweet music in my ears. I sat and listened, smiling softly—not a smile of amusement, but of happiness. I remember those blissful minutes still ; I remember them as clearly as though they had passed but yesterday ; they belong to the past of twenty years ago. How blue the sky was ! —great white clouds slowly crossed it, travelling from the west ; there was a quiet sort of murmur of rustling leaves ; amongst the tall white lilies the bees were busy ; the last of the hay was being carried in the meadows beyond our garden ; all the air was sweet with perfume.

The monotonous voice droned on :

"I told Mr. Barnet that I would first address you on the subject. He made some objection to my doing so—but I over-ruled it. I believe he said that he should come this morning for his answer; I am not sure, but I think he mentioned that he would wish to call on you this morning. My interview with him was somewhat abruptly terminated; a visitor was unfortunately announced when I had had but a few minutes' conversation with him. However, I think I understood that he meant to call this morning. Knowing your impulsive disposition, Mabel, I thought it best to prepare you. I wished you to be perfectly clear about my feelings on the subject; you have my permission to accept him; you have my full approval."

"Thank you, papa." He seemed to expect my thanks; I rendered them mechanically.

"Mr. Barnet, if not a very wealthy man, is not a very poor one. It is as good a marriage as you can expect to make; and I desire that you will accept him. I am not sure what the exact amount of his income is, but ——"

"If Ned had fifty pounds a year, if he were a blacksmith or a carpenter or—or anything, I would marry him like a shot if he asked me!"

"My dear, your English, if graphic, is scarcely classical."

"But I don't want to know what Ned's income is. I don't care a bit!"

My step-father slightly smiled, then slightly sighed.

"I may tell Mr. Barnet, then, that you entertain his proposal?"

"Yes. I love him," I said simply.

Someone tapped at the door; the door opened.

"Mr. Barnet," announced the white-aproned, soft-voiced, parlour-maid; and Ned came in.

His sun-browned face had a ruddier tinge than usual, he was evidently embarrassed, but even in his embarrassment there was a sort of boyish frankness and dignity; he was humorously conscious of being ill-at-ease, and he humorously appreciated the odd experience. He nodded and smiled at me as he shook hands; then he turned with an eager, searching glance towards my step-father.

"I have been having a serious little talk with Mabel," my step-father said, in his slow, mild tone. Nothing ever made him hasten in his speech. "A very serious little talk."

Ned looked towards me. I could not understand the glance; he looked as though he wished that I would go.

"I have laid your proposal before her."

Again Ned glanced quickly in my direction; he was silent; my step-father slowly continued:

"And she is inclined to entertain it ——"

"She accepts me?"

"She admits that she is very much in love with you."

I did not see Ned's face, my eyes were fixed upon the brown roses

on the carpet ; but I heard the joyous little exclamation with which the news was received.

"Where is she?" asked Ned, after a moment's pause.

"Mabel, my love, come here," said my step-father in his smoothest tone. He took my hand between his own and led me towards Ned, who stood perfectly still and made no movement to meet me. He took Ned's hand, too ; he put our hands together. I looked up—I looked into Ned's eyes, and he looked back into mine ; with a little cry I drew my hand away and he quietly released it. I remember still the kind, regretful look, he gave me.

"Mr. Dale," he said, in his frank clear voice, "we have made a mistake. Perhaps the fault was mine—but I think it was yours. I love Mabel. Mab and I are the best and firmest of friends, but my love is Mabel's—I thought you understood."

"You are speaking of Mabel Campion."

"Yes. She is your ward ; I thought it right to tell you, her guardian, that I hoped to try to win her."

"You should have made your meaning clear, sir."

"I thought I had done so."

"You were under a misapprehension. I certainly should not have given my consent to your addressing the young lady of whom you speak. She has this morning promised that she will be my wife——"

Those were the last words I heard as I stole from the room. I stole out softly, shutting the door noiselessly behind me. Then I fled—fled blindly—through the passage, through the orchard, and out into the country lanes. In the house or garden the girls would find me. They were dear girls ! but they would be curious and question me. They were kind, and they would pity me, and comfort me !—and I could not yet bear their comfort or their pity !

I threw myself down on a grassy bank beneath a high shady hedge, and buried my hot face in my hands, and tried to get used and hardened to the feeling of my shame. The shame seemed to burn out all other feelings. I forgot my love ; I only realised my humiliation.

Two or three scalding tears fell through my fingers ; then the tears dried up. My head throbbed and burnt ; my hot hands, pressed against my brow, did not cool it.

There was a sound of advancing steps, and I rose hurriedly to flee. At the same moment Ned came in sight round the curve of the high-edged lane. I guessed rather than saw that it was he ; I walked on swiftly, away from him, down the grass-grown path.

Would he be kind and let me go ? Would he pretend not to see that I was before him as I was pretending not to know that he was behind me ? Would he spare me the humiliation of standing face to face with him again ?—The questions whirled through my brain, whilst I listened with strained attention to the firm quick steps that followed.

The steps hastened ; he meant to overtake me. When I realised his intention I stood still. A green gate opened from the lane into a meadow ; I stood still beside the gate and waited for him, half facing him as he advanced, my cheeks in a scarlet flame, my eyes defiant, daring him to pity me.

If he showed that he was sorry for me, I would never forgive him ! If he was embarrassed and conscious of my embarrassment, I should hate him always !—always !

He came to the gate, and stood still before me.

"Mab," he said.

His tone was a little graver than usual, but frank and simple and direct. Somehow, though he had spoken but one word, the bitter edge of my humiliation vanished ; my eyes looked across at him with a less defiant glance.

"Mab, you're not going to let this spoil our friendship ?"

"N—no," said I doubtfully. "It needn't—unless ——"

"There is no 'unless,'" replied Ned, in his old masterful tone that set me at ease at once. "A silly girl, with no sense and pluck, would think it necessary, perhaps, to be dignified and distant and avoid me. But you're not that kind of girl at all ! Mab, I shall be awfully disappointed in you if you let this make any difference to us."

It was the familiar voice of authority which, ever since I was a toddling baby, and Ned the knicker-bockered hero of my dreams, I had always been accustomed to obey. Now my eyes met his ; we smiled at one another.

"Walk home across the meadow with me, Mab," said he.

He opened the gate and we passed through together. Then he suddenly stood still.

"No, no," he exclaimed, "you've no hat, and the sun is hot."

"I don't mind it."

"Don't you ? I mind it for you."

Twenty-five has lordly airs ; but seventeen loves its heroes to be masterful. Ned turned back with me through the shady lane ; we were silent almost all the way, but our thoughts were busy ; at last, on a sudden impulse, I spoke :—

"I am so sorry," I said— "about Mabel."

"Yes," he replied, briefly. Then again he was silent. He walked with me as far as the garden-gate, and there we parted.

II.

FOUR years had passed.

A very silent family sat at the breakfast table this August morning the head of the family had descended in an irritable mood ; and his women-folk, observing the puckers on his brow, were nervously anxious to avoid calling his attention to themselves.

"The coffee is cold, Mabel. It's strange that we never have a decent cup of coffee in this house!"

For nearly four years our cousin Mabel had been our step-father's wife; he had long ago ceased to smile at her benignly, and ceased to extol her virtues.

"The toast is tough," he grumbled. "My dear, will you be good enough to give a little thought to these domestic duties. There is one of your children crying!—is that Sydney again?"

"I think so, dear," was the gentle, nervous reply.

"I thought I forbade him to cry."

"Yes. But—but you forget, Adrian. He's such a baby—too young to understand."

"Not too young to be ruined by indulgence. After breakfast you can go to the nursery and send Sydney into the study to me."

"Adrian, you are so severe with him."

"On the contrary, Mabel, I am most gentle. But one cannot too early teach one's children to understand the inevitable consequences of their own actions. When Sydney disturbs our comfort by crying in a foolish and peevish manner, we disturb his idea of comfort by seating him without his toys for two or three hours, with his face towards the wall in the corner of my study."

"But —"

"Enough on the subject, Mabel. Pray do not become argumentative, my dear."

A painful silence ensued—a silence so heavy and painful that Alice, my youngest sister, boldly broke it.

"Mab, do you know that Ned Barnet's going abroad? He is. I heard it."

Alice suffered for her boldness; our step-father looked slowly in her direction.

"When was that frock of yours clean, Alice?"

"Yesterday, papa."

"So I imagined, my dear," was the mild-voiced reply. No wonder the bills from the laundress are extortionate! You will wear no more washing-frocks this summer. After breakfast you can take off that dirty dress and put on the black serge you were wearing in the winter; you will wear nothing else until I give you permission."

"Papa! there's the Barnets' garden-party to-day."

"You can wear your black serge—or remain at home."

He rose as he spoke, carefully brushing a speck of dust from his sleeve. He had successfully depressed the spirits of us all and his own temper had grown almost placid; the creases in his brow had smoothed themselves out, and he went slowly and contentedly away to administer reproof to his three-years-old son in the study.

I went out of doors into the garden; and there, half an hour later, Alice joined me. She was a pretty graceful girl of sixteen, she came walking slowly towards me with a very woebegone countenance. The

serge dress was badly made and too small for her ; the material was coarse and thick ; it was a last winter's frock—and last winter Alice had worn her skirts short, and lately she had tasted the dignity of skirts that reached her ankles.

"Look at me, Mab !" she cried, the tears in her eyes, her voice indignant yet pitiful. "Mab, tell me truthfully, do I look absurd ?"

"The dress is hideous ; but you look pretty in spite of it," said I lovingly.

"Dear old Mab ! Oh, Mab, I wish the tables could be turned for a bit and we could be the tyrants ; I should like to dress papa in a schoolboy jacket and an Eton collar, and make him wear his hair long in ringlets."

We laughed. Alice linked her hands around my arm, and we strolled slowly together down the garden paths between the trim beds with their low closely-cropped box-borders. I longed to ask a question ; a simple question enough, but it was only with an effort, after much deliberation, that I asked it.

"Alice, who told you that Ned was going away ?"

"They were talking of it at the Cedars yesterday."

"Ah !—it's true, then !"

"Some scientific expedition wants him to come with them. I didn't listen very attentively—but they're going to explore some place, Africa, or Australia, or some place. His mother was so funny, Mab ! She's proud of his being asked to go, but she wants him to refuse. She says it's an honour ; and then she forgets the honour and says she has heard of tigers and rattlesnakes."

I made no reply. After a minute Alice chatted on again.

"He'll be away for a year or two if he goes. We shall miss him, shan't we ?"

"Yes."

"Don't you think it's odd of him to wish to go ?"

"It seems to me quite natural," I replied abruptly, almost sharply. "His scientific work is most absorbing to him ; he becomes more engrossed in it every year."

"But he ought to settle down and marry ; he's getting so dreadfully old !"

"Not very old. Twenty-nine."

"I wonder why he doesn't marry, Mab. Do you know what the girls have fancied ?"

"No."

"They have fancied lately that he meant to marry you."

I turned sharply away. Bending over the sweet-peas, I plucked a sweet-scented, many-coloured handful.

"But he can't marry you if he insists on getting eaten by snakes and crocodiles in Central Africa."

"Don't, Alice !" I exclaimed harshly.

She threw her arm in an impulsive caressing way around my shoulder.

"Poor old Mab! you're not cross?" she questioned.

"No. But don't talk like that—I don't like it, Alice."

Alice regarded me in silence for a moment. "Wouldn't you marry him if he asked you?" said she in a thoughtful tone.

"No."

"Really?"

"Really. Are you surprised?"

"Well, yes; you see, the girls all fancied that you would."

The girls' voices reached us from the lawn, and, after a few minutes, Alice deserted me and ran across the grass and presently her voice reached me with the rest.

I strolled on, away from the sound of the merry chatter and laughter. My heart was heavy, my steps seemed weighted with lead; I had suddenly grown too weary to walk. A little summer-house stood beside the pathway, I entered and sat down on the rustic seat, and laid my arms upon the rustic table.

I looked out with fixed, unseeing eyes, through the open doorway. Two or three minutes passed, then between the doorway and the sunshine Ned Barnett stood.

"May I come in?" he asked, taking the permission for granted and entering even whilst he spoke. He held out his hand, and my hand was still in his when he sat down on the seat beside me.

"I hoped I should find you alone," he said.

I smiled in acquiescence; his tone had a gentle meaning as, of late, it had often had; but I would not understand it.

"I came to speak to you, Mab."

His grey eyes looked down into mine with a direct, frank glance. He still retained my hand and I let it rest there, too proud to draw it away.

"Mab, do you know what I want to say?"

"Yes. You are going away. Alice has just been telling me."

I looked up at him quietly, straight into his eyes. If four years had taught me nothing else, it had taught me some amount of self-control; I could speak in steady tones, glance at him with calm, unflinching glances, though my heart was sick and sore and aching.

"I am sorry you are going," I said steadily, in the regretful tone in which a friend may speak: "sorry for our sakes. But for your sake I am glad. It will be such a splendid opportunity."

He did not answer me. He rose from his seat and walked to the door. After a minute, I rose too. Standing in the doorway, leaning against the creeper-covered framework, we faced each other.

"That was not what I came to say," he observed at last.

"You're not going?"

"Whether I go or stay, Mab, depends on you," he replied slowly, looking down at me.

My vaunted self-possession deserted me a little then; I was conscious that a wave of colour swept into my face; my glance fell. I

was angry with myself for the blush ; with an effort I raised my eyes and looked at him again.

"You want my advice. You must tell me all about the proposed expedition first ; I scarcely understand well enough to advise you."

"I don't want you to advise me."

He looked down at me steadily.

"Mab, you know what I want—you know as well as I do. I have tried again and again to speak to you—you know that too. You have always prevented me. But now I *must* speak. I love you, Mab ; if you will give me any hope I will stay in England, but if not—if I am no use here, if there is no hope for me—I may as well go."

There was a note of deep feeling in his voice that set my heart beating madly, joyfully. But next moment I was reasoning with my unreasonable happiness, bitterly smiling at it.

"You do not believe in my love," he continued, in his quiet, steady tone. "I have felt your incredulity. But you must believe, Mab."

"I do believe," I returned. I believed that he loved me, but I believed too, that his love was based on pity, I believed that it was a forced growth which he had carefully fostered, and which, if the care and encouragement which he had bestowed on it were withdrawn, would die an easy and natural death. Four years ago he had learnt that I cared for him ; the thought of my unrequited love had pained him constantly ; he had been very sorry for me, very grateful to me ; he had longed and striven to pay the debt of affection which, unasked, I had bestowed. And his heart had answered the demand he made upon it. He loved me—I had watched his love grow, read it in the softer glances which nowadays he gave me, heard it in the gentler, less masterful tones with which he spoke to me. But such love was humiliating—more humiliating than his indifference had been. He loved me, not inevitably, but of deliberate, anxious desire.

"I do believe," I said. "I think you love me—but I think too that, if you try, you will forget me."

"Mab, you are cruel !" he exclaimed, in a quiet voice but reproachfully.

He made no further protest, no stronger denial. Protests were not much in Ned's way, but I chose to ignore that truth. In my pride and bitterness I chose to tell myself that he knew he would, if he tried, forget. Love which is based on gratitude and pity will die an easy death when the basis of gratitude and pity is withdrawn.

"You think me fickle, Mab. Perhaps I deserve your judgment ; I have proved fickle once. I shall not change again, I think."

He qualified his assertion by "I think," for Ned's statements were always temperate—but there was little doubt expressed in his voice and glance. He came a step nearer me and took my hands in his and looked down into my eyes. In spite of myself, I let my soul for one long blissful moment drink its fill of happiness. My heart danced ; my head was light with intoxicating joy. Then resolutely I

struggled away from the love which tempted me ; again I called pride to my aid.

"Ned, tell me one thing. Will you answer one question—truthfully?"

"As many questions as you like—truthfully, you may be sure."

"Did you love me at first because you thought that I loved you?"

"At first, perhaps so. I am not sure. The beginning of my love dates a long way back."

I drew my hands from his, and put them tightly together behind me.

"Ned—lately—" I asked—"what have you thought? Have you fancied I still cared for you?"

He hesitated for a moment. Then: "Yes," he answered, truthfully, "I have thought so. You have often been cold to me, and sometimes a little cruel; but I believe in your heart you love me; I have read your love in a thousand ways."

"You have been mistaken," I returned harshly. "You have read what doesn't exist."

He was silent for a few moments' space.

"You do not love me, Mab?" he asked, in a grieved tone through which a thread of surprise ran. That note of surprise braced my pride, which his sorrow would otherwise have softened. "You used to love me!"

"Why should I be more constant than you? I was a child—no more than a child. Why will you always remember that childish folly against me? One outgrows one's childish loves and hates."

"Is that my answer, Mab?"

"Yes."

I turned away from the door of the summer-house; I went slowly a little way along the garden path. He followed.

"You will very quickly forget me, Ned," I said; and I stopped hastily, in time to check a sob that rose.

"We need not discuss that question," he replied.

"In a year or two you will be rather glad that I refused you."

He half smiled. "You hold one view of my character, Mab, and I another," he responded quietly.

Very slowly we walked towards the house. When we reached it I spoke again.

"Shall you—go away?" I faltered.

"Yes. You have decided that point for me," he replied.

III.

MAY-DAY—a breezy, pleasant day of alternate showers and sunshine. In the garden the laburnum tree is just touched with yellow; the lilac is budding; the trim beds are golden still with the last of the daffodils.

As my step-father has just reminded me, this is my thirtieth birthday. Mabel has kissed me in her gentle fashion and wished me many happy returns of the day ; my step-father has smiled, and sighed, and slightly shrugged his shoulders.

"At the age of thirty, my dear, an unmarried woman prefers her birthday to be forgotten," he remarks.

"I prefer it to be remembered," I reply briskly. "Thank you for your good wishes, Mabel."

"Thirty!" says my step-father, in a musing tone. "Thirty!" he repeats, and sighs. "Thirty! — Well, I suppose an old maid is useful in a family."

I laugh. "I am not an old maid yet, papa."

"No?"

His mildly interrogative tone is certainly provoking ; my own tone has something, I admit, of spinster-like sharpness as I reply.

"I feel quite as young as I desire to feel."

"That is satisfactory. It is not everyone who at thirty still feels herself to be an ornament in the matrimonial market."

I turn away silently ; but my silence serves no purpose.

"An ornament—but relegated to the shelf," continues my step-father, in a musing tone, with a contemplative smile.

"Age has, at all events, its advantages, papa. Sarcasms at thirty fail to touch one."

He professes not to hear me. "As far as I can see, my dear, Barnet means to leave you to grace that shelf."

I have carried the pinafore I am making to a distant widow ; I, too, profess to be deaf to the words which I will not hear.

"Let me give you credit for one virtue," the smooth voice continues. "You are patient. You have smiled on Barnet for thirteen years, and still are unwilling to regard the task as hopeless!"

I have said that sarcasms no longer have the power to hurt me ; but the boast is vain. In spite of my thirty years I turn away now with burning cheeks, with childish anger, with the tears springing to my eyes.

I take my work into the garden. The garden is quiet, for the children are in the schoolroom at their lessons and my own sisters are all married and gone. The lawn is closely shaven, smooth as silk ; the box-borders are trim as ever ; the beds are guiltless of a weed. I take the path which, nine years ago, I took with Alice, and I stop now as I stopped then at the little rustic summer-house beside the pathway. I lean, in a musing pensive mood, against the framework of the entrance and look absently before me at the dancing branches wet with rain, at the moving patches of light and shadow that the branches cast upon the path, at the lilies-of-the-valley beneath the wall, at the bed where by-and-bye the sweet-peas will blossom.

The sweet-peas were blossoming on that morning, nine years ago, when Ned and I stood here together. My thoughts travel slowly

back across those nine years, recall their history, and slowly return to dwell upon the present—the joys and sorrows of to-day.

"Many happy returns of the day to you."

I start and turn my head. Round the path behind the summer-house, Ned has come suddenly upon me ; he stands close beside me, holds out his right hand and smiles in calm friendly unembarrassed fashion.

"Thank you. You remember my birthday, then ?"

"Yes. My memory is very good, you know. It is part of my equipment as a scientist."

Ned stands, as he stood nine years ago, in the doorway facing me. Nine years have aged him. He is nearly forty ; his thick hair is turning a little grey, his short bushy beard is sprinkled with grey threads here and there, his frank eyes seem to have receded further beneath the grave thoughtful brows, his figure has grown more square, more set :—the truth must be told, he looks middle-aged !

He looks gravely and quietly at me. His manner this morning is very different from his manner on that far-away morning of nine years ago. Now there is no suggestion of love-making. His voice takes no tender modulations, his glance does not linger long with soft meanings on my face. I am thirty ; he is approaching forty—we are grown prosaic !

Prosaic ?—are we ? I cannot speak for him ; but I can speak for myself. Nine years ago my heart never ached so badly, never beat so quickly, as it aches and beats to-day. I stand in a quiet pose, my hands loosely clasped before me, and perhaps I look as calm as he ; but the calmness is surface deep—no more.

We stand and chat quietly about many things. For the last few weeks he has been from home ; and he asks me about the small events that have happened in his absence ; and I ask him about the visit he has paid.

"I am not sorry to get back again," he says ; but he says it in that sober matter-of-fact tone which admits of no flattering personal interpretation.

"You are tired at last of travelling ?"

"Not of travelling—but of country house visits," he replies, with a grave yet humorous smile. "Yes, I believe you are right," he admits, after a moment, smiling quickly but gravely again, "I am tired of wandering."

"The African explorer is settling down into a stay-at-home country squire," I answer.

"For awhile."

"You do not expect the jog-trot life to suit you ?"

"Not for long." He does not sigh, and yet there is the suggestion of a sigh in the voice in which he answers.

"Whilst there are worlds to explore you will never be content !"

His grey eyes rest on me. They do not exactly smile ; it would

be difficult to correctly describe the expression in their depths. They rest on me with a long look ; then he glances slowly away at the slender rain-laden branches of the laburnum, which sway lightly in the breeze and shake down showers of rain-drops which sparkle in the sunlight as they fall.

"Whilst life lasts, Mab, I shall never be content," is all he says ; but his tone has a little thrill of deep meaning, and for a moment my heart stands still, then bounds forward at a passionate speed that keeps me silent whether I will or no.

For nine long years the record of our talk with one another has been a record of safe commonplaces, impersonal, unemotional. Only at rare intervals across that desert of years have I caught a glance, a tone, that has made me wonder whether the love I refused to take is dead? Nine years ago I put happiness away from me proudly, impetuously. For nine years I have known regret, loneliness, bitter heart-ache. To-day I have, perhaps, too little pride, as nine years ago I had too much ; if I thought he still cared for me, his silence should not stand between us ; I would let no ceremonies, no conventionalities, spoil our lives.

"Why are you—not content?" I ask ; my tone is steady with an effort.

He turns his head and half smiles at me again. "In another week," he says, as one who has answered my question and changes his tone, "the laburnum and lilac will both be in bloom."

"Yes."

And then we are both silent.

"Ned, we have been friends so many years," I plead, trying to speak easily, frankly, pleasantly, in friendly fashion ;—"friends are useless if they cannot grumble to one another ! Twenty years ago—fifteen years ago—we used to pour out to one another all our causes of discontent."

He looks before him for nearly a minute before he answers.

"Since then—" he says, and pauses.

"Yes?"

"We have been both more and less than friends."

"Does that prevent our speaking—of our troubles to each other?"

"It prevents my speaking of one trouble to you," he answers simply.

How my hands tremble ! I clasp my fingers together. My heart is beating so fast and furiously that I scarcely can draw my breath ; my thoughts leap forward to a bold resolve—a resolve too bold to be womanly—a resolve so bold that I dare not pause before I speak.

"Ned, once you said you loved me. You have got over it—your love?"

The reserve, the silence of nine years is broken. It is I who have torn down the barrier ! And yet I have only partly destroyed it ; he would like to hastily pile up the breach.

"One gets over most things, Mab, in time," he says. But I scarcely hear his words; his voice has a tremor which makes my pulses beat with joy; his face betrays that the time of which he speaks has not yet come.

I scarcely know what I do, but I know that I put out my hand and lay it on his arm.

"Don't get over it, Ned," I say in the lowest of tones; and then, having been the boldest of women, I suddenly become the silliest, and burst into a flood of hysterical foolish tears.

And ten minutes later Ned and I are sitting together on the rustic seat; his arm is around me and his strong clasp holds me close to him.

"You loved me nine years ago when you refused me?" he says, incredulously, repeating a statement I have just, 'twixt laughter and tears, faltered forth.

"Yes; but I thought you loved me out of pity. I thought you would easily forget."

"And I thought my offer had hurt and offended you. I thought your girlish love for me was dead. I resolved not to persecute you with my love, not to speak to you again."

"And you have cared for me—all these years?"

"All these years—yes. And we might have been happy together!"

"And now I am so old, Ned!"

"Old! Not so very old, Mab. If you were younger, you would scorn your grey-haired lover."

"Papa will call it a prosaic match."

We both smile. Our eyes meet, and the smiles in our eyes deepen.

"Whatever his verdict may be, we can bear it with philosophy," says Ned.

And again we smile.

"Is the match a prosaic one to you, Mab?" he questions, a thread of laughter and a thread of tenderness both running through his tone.

My answer is a smile and a question.

"Is it prosaic to you?" I ask. "Oh, Ned, why have we thrown away so many years of happiness?"

"Perhaps the discipline has been good for us," he whispers quietly. "Everything happens for the best to those who do not take their lives into their own hands. And you, Mab, are dearer, sweeter to me than ever."

He gently lays my head upon his shoulder and folds me in his arms. My heart is at rest at last. I would wait another thirteen years for this happiness.

“THIS HURRYING LIFE.”

A LITTLE while to pause and rest,
A little space to draw full breath—
Ah me ! we are too sorely pressed
Who run for life and death !

We know not what the goal may be,
We know not what the prize when won,
But still we struggle feverishly,
And though we faint, we run.

Some fail beneath the noon-tide heat,
And fall with faces white and wan ;
Some hold their course with bleeding feet—
Yet still the race goes on.

And some who fall rise up no more,
Yet other runners take their place ;
And still as madly as before
Swings on the furious race !

We have no time to pause and read
The beauty writ in earth and sky ;
We may not slacken in our speed,
Or men may pass us by.

The children call us from their play,
And love and friendship speak us kind—
We may not wait to hear to-day
Lest we be left behind !

We still must strain our aching sight,
The goal is nearer than before ;
And ever hastens on the night
When we can run no more.

We labour on, we scarce know why,
Nor what reward our toil shall bless ;
We rise up ere the sun is high,
And eat the bread of carefulness.

Yet sometimes from the winning post
Comes back the cry of “ Labour lost,”
And doubts chill those who strive the most
If gain exceeds the cost.

For there are times when dull and cold
 The prizes look when nearer seen ;
 When lust of power and love of gold
 Show base and poor and mean !

And worthless every proud success,
 To hearts so toil-worn and oppressed,
 And all the world a wilderness
 Wherein there is no rest.

Lord ! stay this hurrying stream of life,
 And check it in its desperate pace !
 Withdraw us from this loveless strife
 To run a better race.

Where each alike the prize may win,
 Where Victory is not to the strong,
 And they who triumph find therein
 The thing for which they long.

Then if we fall, or if we stand,
 'Tis Thou alike our steps wilt keep,
 And give, when night is o'er the land,
 To Thy beloved sleep.

'Till the day break and shadows flee,
 Earth pales, and Heaven is open wide :
 And, waking to Thy likeness, we
 Therein are satisfied.

CHRISTIAN BURKE.



FAIR NORMANDY.

BY CHARLES W. WOOD, F.R.G.S., AUTHOR OF "THROUGH HOLLAND,"
"UNDER NORTHERN SKIES," "LETTERS FROM MAJORCA,"
ETC. ETC.



OLD HOUSES, NORMANDY.

WE started one morning from Coutances for a two-days' excursion into the country. Our host had provided us with a small victoria, and if our driver did not equal the famous driver of Caen, he was, at least, safe, civil, and obliging.

Every one from the hotel turned out to see us depart; we might have been going away for a month or a year instead of thirty-six hours—for, starting early one morning, we were to return the evening of the next day, in time for the important duties of table d'hôte. The landlord had a hun-

dred recommendations for the driver; the landlady brought forward her best rug, and insisted upon carefully adjusting it about our knees. "If it did not rain there would be dust, and if it did rain a mere umbrella was nothing. It often rained in their country, and when it rained it was always in earnest." A statement with which we thoroughly agreed.

But at that moment the sun was shining in a brilliant and cloudless sky, and we felt we could afford to listen to these gloomy visions. One always hopes for the best, and in broad sunshine the clouds seem very far off. This applies to other conditions of life besides the weather.

At last we were off. Our drive was to be inland; for though not

very far from the sea as the crow flew, we should not at any time approach it.

We might have taken our excursion by train, for the train ran to the chief points at which we touched ; but we should not have seen so much of the country, or of the villages and people. It is these small glimpses by the way that give one so many after recollections, and make one feel more familiar with the district that is being explored. We also wished very much to visit the Abbey of Blanchelande, of which we had heard wonders in England, and this was not near to any station.

Our way again led us down the steep hill and past the ruined aqueduct, which looked more ancient and romantic every time we saw it. We also came to the turning to the Château Grâtot, and could not resist a second visit.

It was lovelier than ever. On the steps stood the old woman and the dog, just as we had last seen them. They might have been images of stone, motionless as the steps themselves. But the woman was glad to see us, and received us as old acquaintances.

"Had we heard since we saw her last, from that far off place, England?"

"Did we like Coutances and the neighbourhood, and was it at all like the rest of the world?"

"As for herself, she knew nothing of the world, far or near. She had never travelled. She knew that Paris was the capital of France, but she had never seen it. Once when a young woman, she had gone to Rouen ; it was on the occasion of her marriage, and she was only eighteen, but she had never seen it since ; had never indeed, gone twenty miles beyond Coutances. The Château Grâtot? She had been told it was very fine and beautiful, and that few places equalled it ; but she could not see its great attraction. To her it was a farm house and nothing more ; and in winter it was horribly cold."

Just then Katerine came forth with a tray of linen, on her way to the moat. She enquired anxiously after her photograph. "Was it a success, and had we brought her a copy?" We had to inflict a disappointment by telling her that it was not even developed, and would not be until we returned to that far-off spot of earth—England. She seemed to think that in that case she might wait until doomsday for her portrait ; and she was not far wrong, for when in course of time it came to be developed, Katerine's pretty head was a very misty and ghostly affair. She had turned it round, you will remember, in the very act of being taken.

She went her way and we went ours, after a last long look at the wonderful old château ; and again we said to each other that we had seldom seen anything to equal it.

We passed through very quiet and sylvan country. Through winding roads bordered by hedges, with green fields beyond, and many a richly wooded slope and undulation. Our first halt was at

Lessay, a small town of some sixteen hundred inhabitants, uninteresting in everything except its beautiful church of pure Norman architecture. Lessay owes its origin to a Benedictine monastery founded in 1040 by a Vicomte de Cotentin, who for reasons of his own, which history has not handed down to us, renounced the world and became a Benedictine monk.

Of the monastery nothing now remains but the church, of which the exterior is so fine, that it is worth a long journey to visit. Attached to it was a large house or château, built on the site of the ancient monastery, and probably still possessing many of its traces. It is inhabited by an eccentric old lady, who, at her lodge, keeps an equally eccentric female custodian: a species of Griffin, who would not allow us to move hand or foot, even on the exterior of the château, without her vigilant escort. Whether she had less confidence (and therefore less discrimination) in our personal appearance than the world in general; or whether she had once been deceived, and had given up all faith in human nature, we could not tell—and she was too unamiable to be asked.

The church was cruciform, with a splendid and very massive tower, around which the trees waved, and the rooks flew cawing, holding their parliaments. The tone of the building was singularly fine, and with the surrounding trees it formed a romantic and very beautiful picture.

The little town with its grey, quiet houses, was absolutely uninteresting; and it possessed no ancient relics or mediæval buildings, as it ought to have done, considering the age of its abbey. We saw few people, and as we clattered through the small place we awoke echoes that called forth no excitement. Inquisitive faces did not appear at windows, and doors were not thrown open to see who passed that way.

We continued our drive full of the beautiful Norman minster, whose influence followed us; and presently encountered the one disappointment of our little excursion.

We were now bound for La Haye-du-Puits, a small market town, where we were to halt a couple of hours for rest and luncheon. On our way we should pass the Abbey of Blanchelande, one of the chief points in our drive. The country was delightful; a succession of green fields and flowering hedgerows, rich woods, and a rippling running stream, reflecting the sunshine that poured down and gilded all with its life and warmth.

It was a long white road that we traversed, and few people interrupted its solitude. Now and then, a quiet clumsy countryman met us and gave us a civil and friendly "*Bon jour*," as they generally do in these remoter parts of the country—in all remote parts of France for that matter; bringing out their greeting with a curious patois that somehow chimes in and blends with an impression of white-washed village cottages, standing in small gardens in which grow

old-fashioned, sweet-scented flowers: gilliflowers and pansies, marjoram and wild thyme, and the yellow daffodil that delights the eye more than the sense of smell. Small tender trees grow about the cottages; limes and birches; and from the open doorways there comes wafted upon the air the perfume of the peat fire that in so many of these country villages, does excellent duty for coal; and the dark purple smoke goes curling upwards from the roof, and if there happens to be a background of larger trees, as is so often the case, what a romantic and lovely picture it all forms.

These visions rise up before one, clear and distinct, as the country people pass you by on the road with their salutation. So it was with us to-day, but our greetings were few and far between. At length a turn in the road revealed a gateway and portals, and a lodge; "and that," said our driver, "is the Abbey of Blanchelande."

He drew up at the entrance, and we rang a peal which clanged and echoed in the quiet avenues that we hoped soon to tread. It was a vain hope. A woman quickly appeared—to our surprise, for if the abbey was inhabited, we had supposed it to be by monks. Still this was merely an entrance lodge; the abbey was some distance beyond the gates, not visible from them; a portress might possibly be allowed here.

She approached and asked our pleasure.

We replied that we wished to see the abbey; had come far for that purpose.

"I am very sorry," she said; "it is all a mistake; the abbey is not shown to visitors."

"Why not?" we asked.

"Because it is strictly against orders. It is no longer a monastery, but is inhabited by a community of ladies, and their privacy cannot be intruded upon. For the rest," added this faithful guardian, "there is not very much to see, even if you could have been admitted."

This was her opinion, but probably she had no eye for the beauties of architecture, and no reverence for antiquity. But we saw that pleading would be vain; there was nothing for it but to depart, leaving the charms of the Abbey of Blanchelande to the imagination.

It was a disappointment, for we had heard a good deal about its beauty, and the desire to see it had been one of the inducements of our present excursion. But we could only make the best of it and went our way, leaving the abbey and its unseen charms, architectural and human, behind us. In due time we reached our mid-day halting place, La Haye-du-Puits.

It happened to be market day, and the place was crowded. After the quiet country roads and the deserted aspect of Lessay, we almost felt as if we had come back to the bustle of the world. The market-place was full of country people, and it was a very lively scene.

There was very little in the way of costume, but this, everywhere, is fast disappearing. In a few years' time one will probably look in vain for what has been so distinctive a feature of Normandy, one of its greatest charms.

The place itself had not a single attraction about it. The church was plain and unadorned, and not worth a visit ; the one solitary point about it a tomb of the sixteenth century. Close to it was the inn, crowded with market people, none of them of very agreeable type. The men are primitive in their ways and manners ; at table, for instance, often rather tearing their food than eating it according to civilised rules. The landlord had turned himself into his own chef, thus combining two offices in his ministry. He went flourishing about in the orthodox white cap and apron, and looked every inch, not a king, but a cook. He was very civil and obliging, and much regretted that we had elected to go on to St. Sauveur for the night, instead of remaining with him. His hotel was considered far better than any other in that part of the country ; he might say so without flattery, and without encroaching on his reputation for modesty.

His "bill of fare" was abundant, but a strange mixture of ingredients, fish, meat, vegetables and sweets appearing without any order of precedence, without rhyme or rule. It was all one to the assembled gentlemen of the market. Their motto apparently was "despatch and quantity," aided by alternate deep draughts of wine and cyder. Nothing came amiss to them ; they took of the bottle which happened to be nearest. The result seemed to be in no way detrimental to their constitutions ; for the most part they looked bronzed and vigorous.

In the market-place we had much amusement with our instantaneous cameras. Some, not understanding the process, took alarm, thinking that we were armed with some infernal machine, which would presently explode with great loss of life. Others more civilised, were highly entertained, placed themselves in attitudes, and were charmed to be taken. The place was so crowded, and the groups were so numerous, that if we had had a hundred plates we could have used them all.

Every species of sale and barter was going on, from the selling of corn and other grain down to the ordinary fruit and vegetable stalls. The fruit was good and abundant, the pears being especially delicious. In the centre of the market-place a waggon was being sold by auction, but the bidding was not energetic, and the final price reached was evidently a disappointment to the owner.

On any other day it is probable that La Haye-du-Puits would have seemed a very deadly-lively place, deserted and uninteresting, without a single point of attraction about it. Here in the far-off eleventh century, there was a strongly-fortified castle, belonging to the founder of the Abbey of Lessay ; but all has long since disappeared

except a fragment of old wall, covered with moss and lichen. This lies a little away from the town, and was the only small relic of antiquity that we discovered.

We were not sorry to take up our drive again at the appointed



COUTANCES CATHEDRAL.

time, and leave the bustle and gentle riot of La Haye-du-Puits behind us. The landlord came out, and bowed us away in the full uniform of a chef, with a hundred apologies that he had not been able to give us more of his time and attention, and a hope that we would one day return to honour his establishment.

Away we went through very much the same sort of country that we

had traversed in the morning ; fair pastures and richly wooded undulations, and white roads, bounded by pleasant hedgerows. It was towards six o'clock, and the sun was declining, when the little town of St. Sauveur le Vicomte appeared to our vision. As we approached it looked small and unpretending, with red-tiled roofs showing against undulations, and here and there a church tower ; a small sylvan place in a sort of depression, the running waters of the Douve falling soothingly upon the ear.

Our driver crossed a bridge and passed from the open country into the quiet street of the little town, turning immediately into a small square, and drawing up at the Hôtel des Voyageurs with the air of a state coachman entering the gates of St. James's on the day of a levee.

I confess that our hearts sank within us, and we felt that we had certainly left life and civilisation behind us at La Haye-du-Puits. We were quite wrong, as it turned out.

We thought that we had certainly never put up at a less promising abode. To all appearance it was nothing but an ordinary estaminet, and the door by which we entered led direct to the kitchen. There on one side was Madame Cotigny, in very simple costume, presiding at a stove, engaged in the mysteries of a pot-au-feu ; and on the other side, a screeching parrot, who immediately ordered us off the premises. This order, however, was counterbalanced by Madame, who bade us enter and be welcome, whilst she administered a friendly reprimand to her parrot by tapping it on the head with the hot wooden spoon with which she had been stirring the aforesaid mysteries : a proceeding that turned all the parrot's wrath upon herself.

Somehow the little incident made us feel at home, and we found that if everything was primitive, everything was also excessively clean. And when we had seen our rooms upstairs, and noted the spotless linen and the snow-white curtains, we began to think that we had judged too hastily by outside appearances. This was one of those rare cases where the result was better than the promise.

More was yet to come, for we found that there was a dining-room at the back of all this modest frontage which would not have disgraced an inn of fashion ; not from its magnificence, of which there was none, but from its quiet comfort.

We went back to the kitchen to reconnoitre and to see how the land lay, and whether there was corn in Egypt. Madame Cotigny was very friendly and civil, offered us chairs, and apologised for the rudeness of her pet parrot.

"It was nothing but jealousy," she declared. "The bird hates to see any stranger coming into the place ; he knows it means work for me, and he thinks that he will receive less attention in consequence. The creature has almost the sense of a human being."

He certainly was listening, with his head on one side, very much as if he took it all in.

"Messieurs are from England," remarked Madame, with a discrimination that did honour to her perceptive faculties. "A hundred small things tell me so, including the *sacs de voyage*. It is not often I receive Englishmen, but I much prefer them to all other nations." A delicately-turned compliment that we did not know whether to take as flattery or an expression of her true sentiments; but we gave ourselves the benefit of the doubt and made our obeisance.

"We hope Madame can give us dinner to-night?" we remarked, thinking that we should have to be thankful for small mercies.

"Parbleu, Messieurs," replied Madame, "a day without dinner would be a day lost in the calendar. It is now six o'clock, and at half-past seven you will be served. That will give you just time to visit the old castle and see a little of the neighbourhood."

We took the hint and departed, not sorry to have exchanged the carriage for the freedom of a walk.

We soon found our way to the castle. Its foundations were laid in the tenth century, and it subsequently belonged to the Tessons and the Harcourts; to fall from them into the hands of Edward the Third, by whom it was given to Sir John Chandos, one of the captains in the wars of the Black Prince.

It has now lost all its military prestige, and has been turned into a hospital for the sick. You pass up a steep incline and under a huge gateway, so strongly built that it looks as if it would defy time itself. It has two enclosures or courtyards, but of the outer one nothing remains but a few ruined walls, three small and dismantled towers, and the postern gateway formed of two more towers. There is a splendid and massive keep-tower, belonging to the earlier structure. Once the courtyards echoed with the clash and clang of swords, and rang with the voices of officers in command. All these have long passed away, and in their place you see quiet Sisters of Mercy hurrying to and fro in their mission of tending the sick and sorrowful; and their footsteps make no echo, and their voices do not startle the air.

From the top of the keep-tower the view was extensive and very fine. The small town lay at our feet, with its few and quiet streets. A plain surrounded us, through which the Douve took its winding course to the sea. There were wooded hills beyond, and country roads bordered by their formal trees. The shades of evening were falling as we looked, and much of the distance was already in obscurity. Every moment the shadows deepened and the river loomed more pale and silvery, whilst the flush of sunset that had illumined the sky with its crimson glory, faded into the afterglow that immediately precedes night and darkness.

We turned from this relic of the past, and presently found ourselves in Madame's comfortable *salle-à-manger*.

We had to pass through the kitchen to reach it, and the parrot, mindful of the episode of the wooden spoon, looked maliciously at

us but said nothing. As for the dinner, Madame proved herself equal to the occasion. Without being elaborate, it was one of the best we sat down to in Fair Normandy. There was only one other guest besides ourselves; a Frenchman; who told us he was a commercial traveller, made himself very conversational and agreeable, proved a man of sense and information, and gave us many useful hints concerning the neighbourhood and the people. He seemed to know the whole country well, had travelled with his eyes and understanding open, and was really a lover of nature. He spoke eloquently of the hills and valleys and laughing streams, the ancient towns and fine churches of Normandy—he was himself a native of Rouen—and mourned the decline of some of her ancient habits and her picturesque costumes. Year by year he noticed that these were steadily diminishing.

We wondered what business he could find to do in so small a place as St. Sauveur, but were not impertinent enough to enquire and he did not enlighten us. When dinner was over he went his way, and when we came down the next morning it was just in time to see him depart. He made us a polite bow and wished us a Bon Voyage—without which he had not been a true Frenchman—and we saw him no more.

We ourselves, after a modest breakfast, set out for the old Abbey of St. Sauveur, which we had not seen the previous night. We crossed the bridge and the river, turned into a narrow street of small and rather poverty-stricken houses, and came out upon a country road. In a few moments we had reached the gateway of the old abbey. A peal upon the bell brought forth a Sister, dressed after the Order of the Miséricorde, who admitted us.

Of the ancient abbey, founded by the Benedictines in 1080, little remains. It is now the property and the head house of the Sœurs de la Miséricorde, who here receive a certain number of orphan children, whom they clothe, instruct and launch out into the world, thus performing a true work of mercy.

They have re-built the Church of the Benedictines, which stands beside the orphanage. It is a very pretty and quiet corner of the world, and the lines of the children who live here have fallen in pleasant places. The grounds within the boundaries are smooth and velvety; tall trees wave and rustle in the breeze, and cast long shadows over the green grass; the sunshine glistens between the leaves; Sisters in their picturesque garments flit from building to building, looking after their charges, and ministering to their necessities. The abbey itself was ruined during the Revolution: that wicked era that has so much to answer for in the way of destruction.

As we went towards the church, a Sister met us and offered to conduct us through it. She was very chatty and cheerful, and entered into all sorts of worldly topics. She was enthusiastic about her Order, devoted to the Mother Superior, and full of love for their

little flock. She took intense pride in the church, which she seemed to think more beautiful than anything that had ever been built since the creation of the world : mourning above all that the young architect had died of consumption during its progress, and so had never looked upon the completed fruits of his labour.

The little Sister flitted from point to point, from aisle to choir,



OLD HOUSES, NORMANDY.

indicating everything that to her was beautiful ; falling into raptures as she gazed upon a coloured window that she thought fit for Paradise, and we, I fear, scarcely thought fit for earth. Then she escorted us through the grounds and up to the gateway, and delivering us over to the tender mercies of the portress who had admitted us, made us a deep reverence and went her way : first asking us if we would not return that evening and attend the service in the chapel.

But that was beyond our power, for we were not ubiquitous, and our charioteer was even then preparing for departure. Before another hour had struck upon the gong of time, we had said good-bye to St. Sauveur le Vicomte, to the Hôtel des Voyageurs, to Madame Cotigny and her unfriendly parrot, who saw us depart with fluttering of wings and a war whoop that would have done honour to a wild Indian, and every expression of joy that bird can be capable of.

"He doesn't really mean it," said Madame in lame apology; "it is only his way. As soon as you have gone, and we sink back into quietness, he will mope and be as dull as ditch-water. Is it not so, chéri?"

And chéri rewarded the caressing movement by making a grab at its mistress's finger, and bidding her as well as ourselves begone.

A few moments more and we had obeyed: but we had been so comfortable here, felt so much at home; Madame had, as it were, made us so much of the house; there had been so much peace and repose about our little sojourn: that we left with regret.

We were now on our way to Bricquebec, which was to be the extent of our journey. The aspect of the country did not change. The long, straight road was bordered by hedges, and the green fields lay beyond. The mile-stones upon the way alone marked our progress. We saw no villages; and this morning no pedestrians were abroad. At the end of two hours our driver pointed to a small town in the distance, above which a cloud of blue smoke ascended towards heaven. That said he, was Bricquebec. The sturdy little horse pricked up his ears at the word and quickened his pace, as if he knew that it was the extremity of his journey. In a very short time we had reached our destination, and found ourselves within the portals of a wonderful old inn.

For picturesqueness and antiquity probably it has not its equal in Normandy. It is called the Hôtel du Vieux Château, and it forms part of what was once the old castle. Very much of its antiquity remains, and its grey walls and mullioned windows have a classical, almost an ecclesiastical appearance. It dates back to the fourteenth century. The walls surrounding it are still tolerably perfect, and the square towers placed at intervals are of the eleventh century.

Just above the inn, casting its shadow upon the slated roof and athwart the courtyard, is a fine octagonal donjon-keep, sufficiently ruined to make it very romantic and picturesque. To ascend to the summit is a labour of love, and you are rewarded by a magnificent view. A great stretch of country, diversified by fields and hedges, dense woods, in which are many Druidical remains, *not* visible from the tower; a Trappist monastery some two miles without the town, to which we determined to wend our steps as soon as luncheon was over; a fair, winding river in the distance, which looked like silver in the shade, and like gold where it caught the flashing sunlight upon its surface. At our feet lay the small undulating, uninteresting town,

with few traces of antiquity about it, excepting the donjon on which we stood, and the gray walls, with their square towers, and the picturesque old inn that alone was sufficient to make the place famous ; and the old church that is both Norman and Gothic, partly of the eleventh century, and partly of the sixteenth.

We came down the crumbling staircase of the keep, and entered the hotel, where luncheon was spread in a room that might once have been the castle hall. The whole interior was interesting. The kitchen was spacious and vaulted, and the chef presiding at a huge stove was substantial enough to have been an ancient baronial retainer. Upstairs there were long and gloomy passages and many rooms. What had once been great banqueting or other halls, had evidently been partitioned off into chambers for modern travellers. Nothing of the past haunted them but a ghostly atmosphere. It seemed filled with martial echoes of a dead-and-gone age ; and one felt that a night spent beneath the roof would cause one's dreams to be haunted by the shades of a great crowd of soldiers in warlike costume, and by the clashing of arms, the clanking of armour, and much military pageant. The very boards would creak, and the wind would pass the casements with sighing, sorrowful sound.

But the luncheon was anything but ghostly, it was very real and matter of fact and unromantic ; very substantial and satisfying ; and we did full justice to it. What would you ? We cannot live upon air in this lower world ; and ruins, which are such a feast of reason and flow of soul, will do nothing towards satisfying the pangs of hunger.

After this we departed in search of the monastery, which we had a great desire to see. Why is it that these places have a certain fascination for us, so that we never miss an inspection when the opportunity offers itself ? Is it that a certain sadness overshadows them ? a certain mystery ? and in all sadness and mystery there is attraction. Is it anxiety to test human nature, to learn something of a community of men who have withdrawn themselves from the world, with all its pleasures and temptations, and discover how the ordeal has worked, and what effect it has had upon the moral and spiritual natures of these recluses ?

As a rule the result is disappointing. They become monks but not mystics : pain and sorrow and suffering you see upon their faces ; often a discontented, almost despairing, expression ; as if the life had somehow not quite answered its intended purpose ; had missed its mark, and failed to bring that closeness to heaven which a life of constant devotion should inspire. Alas, these poor recluses forget that they are human, and that, whether in the privacy of the cell or in the crowded world, the frailties of the human heart can be battled with but never quite conquered until that heart has ceased to beat, and the soul has winged its flight to eternity.

So we also were attracted towards the Trappist monastery, and set out in the hope of being admitted.

It was a long country lane bordered by high hedges, and a perfect Slough of Despond. There had been some sharp rain in the night, and the soil was bad. But the longest lane comes to an end, and we presently reached the turning to the monastery. Soon we came to a large outer shed, where a monk sat on a low chair reading a book. He had lately been chopping wood, a small pile of which lay beside him. Like the others, he had probably taken the vow of silence; but we came upon him so unexpectedly that when we asked him the way to the entrance he told us to go higher up. His words certainly were few, and he seemed startled by the sound of his voice; his face was pale and his head uncovered; but he had no sooner spoken than he concealed his face in his brown capuchon, and returned to his breviary.

We went on. It seemed a large and important place, given up to industry. We reached the principal entrance and rang a peal which awoke the echoes of a quadrangle. In a few moments a monk opened the door and stood before us, also in cowl and cloak. But he had not taken the vow of silence, for he spoke readily enough. We asked permission to see over the monastery.

"It is the wrong hour," he replied. "In ten minutes they will all be preparing for chapel, and no one is then admitted."

"We have come from far," we pleaded, "and the present moment is our only opportunity."

"Enter," he replied in friendly tones; "I will show you all I can. But if you meet any of the brothers, do not speak to them. Here is my little room and my bed," he began, showing us a small apartment in the lodge; and it was far more comfortable than anything we saw in the cells.

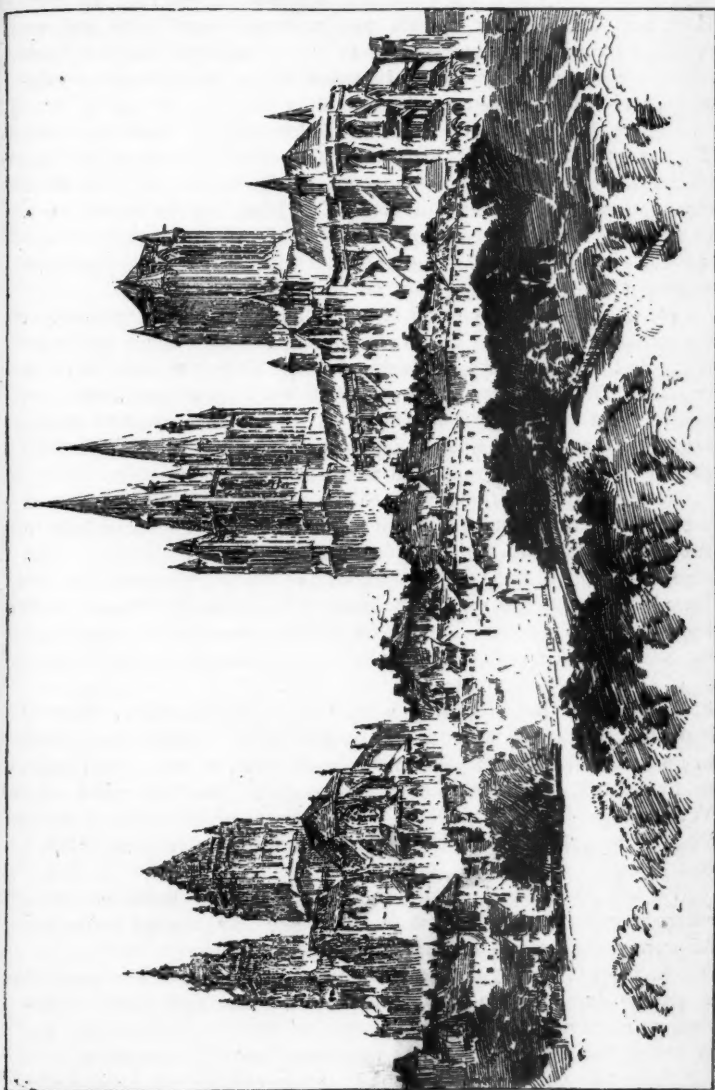
We began with the exterior, and soon saw what an industrious little world was within the monastery walls. There were endless stables for cows and horses, and styes for pigs, of which they had an immense number. They make cheeses here, and send them to all parts of France; but no one is allowed to see the process, and the secret is carefully guarded. Once it had nearly escaped them. A visitor went in apparently out of curiosity, but in reality to learn the art. He had nearly succeeded in doing so, when something betrayed him. He was expelled, and after that day visitors were never admitted into the cheese factory.

We saw great stones for crushing the apples that made the cyder; and everything was built on the best and most approved principle.

Then we went within the monastery, and the brother who conducted us was kindly oblivious of the fact that the ten minutes had more than expired.

Again we saw the long, silent, whitewashed corridors, with which all who have visited many monasteries are familiar. About the corridors cowed monks were lingering as if waiting for an hour to strike.

It was not the hour for visiting, as our guide had told us, and so we were favoured. I have never seen such sad, cadaverous faces. Some



COUTANCES.

of them looked as if they had risen from their graves expressly to attend mass, and would return there as soon as it was over. They

gazed at us for a moment, then bowed their head in greeting and turned away, each as we passed him.

We went on down the corridors, which really seemed endless. Here and there a door opened and a monk issued forth, and we caught a momentary glimpse of his cell, bare and comfortless. They fitted down the passages with noiseless tread, their bare feet protected only by thin sandals.

The rules are painfully strict. Absolute silence is one of them. They may not even ask each other for anything, but make their wishes known by signs. They wear no linen and sleep in their cloaks upon a hard straw mattress. The food is scarcely sufficient to maintain life. We went into the refectory, where their supper was spread. It consisted of nothing but a little dry bread, hard and coarse, a little cheese, a little oil for salad, a few vegetables and a little milk. Fish they never see, and meat is only allowed once a day when they are ill. They take nothing between four in the afternoon and six the next morning, and yet they rise every day at two A.M. We wondered whether any fainted from exhaustion during matins; but we no longer wondered at their cadaverous and death-like appearance. On fête days they rise at midnight, and nearly all their time is spent in prayer and meditation.

We went up into the gallery of the church, and looking through the curtains, saw some of them assembling. They entered by a small side door, and each one fitted like a ghost to his appointed place. We could not help thinking of the Grande Chartreuse in the Dauphiné Alps and a visit we had once paid there. How, attending the midnight mass, and looking on from just such a gallery as this, we had seen the monks gliding along in the darkness, each carrying a lantern which he placed beside him. What a weird, ghostly company they had formed; what weird, ghostly shadows their lanterns had thrown around, leaving the further end of the chapel in impenetrable gloom; what pale, ghostly faces we had gazed upon as they threw back their hoods and revealed their shaven heads. Yet faces and forms not half so cadaverous as these of La Trappe that we looked upon to-day. These indeed, we had never seen equalled.

We left the chapel, and on our way through more corridors entered a room where other monks were seated, also in cowl and cloak. All were studying, and I think our guide said they were still novices who had not taken the final vows. Amongst them was a young lad of sixteen or seventeen seated at a table, reading diligently. He took no more notice of us than if he had been carved in stone, yet we saw by his expression that he was conscious of our presence.

"Is he also going to be a monk?" we asked, feeling infinite pity for him.

"Without doubt," replied the brother. "But he has not yet taken the vows and he may withdraw if he pleases."

"Is he likely to do so?" we continued.

"No," answered the brother. "He will no doubt spend his life here."

Our heart bled for him. It was the saddest boy's face we had ever seen. There was a profound despair upon it we had seldom found on one four times his age. It was a fair face, and ought to have been laughing, frank and handsome. The eyes were large and blue, with the blue of the sky, for he raised them for an instant as we looked at him; raised them with a questioning gaze as if he would penetrate through his prison walls to the far-off heaven, and ask of it an answer to the mysteries of life that were too much for him. But the eyes that ought to have been so happy at seventeen were sunken, and the face had the death-like hue of the grave—the hue and expression that sat upon the faces of so many of the monks we saw that day. What was his secret? What the cause of his being there; of his renouncing the fair and beautiful world in life's sweet morning? Was it poverty? or loneliness? or a craving for solitude and retirement, that would certainly one day leave him, and bring in its place a life-long regret for the living death to which he had consigned himself? What could he know of life, of the world, of the human heart, at seventeen? The very sadness and despair upon his face proved his mistake.

He was dressed also in a monk's cloak, but the cowl lay back and did not conceal his fair head. As yet he was but a novice. And those about him, and older than he, would they not be merciful and warn him that his place was not there, but out in the world, where he might do battle with life, and rejoice in his freedom, and revel in the beauties of nature, the blue sky, the green fields, the flowering hedgerows, the free fresh air of heaven, the companionship of his fellows?

It was surely one of the saddest sights the world contained. We longed to go up to him and unloosen his cloak, and speak words of hope and encouragement, and take him by the hand and conduct him back to life and happiness. But we could not; this would not have been permitted; we were not even allowed to give him a word of sympathy. And so we turned away from a scene that was really heart-breaking in its pathetic misery. The door closed upon us, and shut them into a living tomb. But the face haunted us then, as it haunts us now, as it will ever haunt us when we think of that visit to that monastery of Notre Dame de Grâce de la Trappe.

We set out for the inn, and in doing so began our return journey. Two ways of reaching Coutances lay before us; one was to drive the whole way, by which means we should not arrive at our journey's end before midnight; the other to leave the carriage at St. Sauveur and there take the train, which would land us at Coutances about six o'clock.

We chose the latter, since we had nothing to gain by the longer

drive, nothing new to see, and part of it would have to be taken in the darkness, and the nights grew chilly. Our driver was soon ready to depart, and when we turned away we felt we were leaving a very lovely scene behind us, and such an hostelry as we should not meet again.

The drive back to St. Sauveur was uneventful. As we passed through the little town we caught sight of Madame Cotigny having a passage



ABBEY OF HAMBYE.

at arms with her parrot. Perhaps the daring creature had been rude to some fresh arrival ; or possibly it had repaid Madame's confidence and affection with a grip in which there was too much earnestness. We did not know, and we did not wait to enquire. We passed with a clatter up the long straight street that led to the station, and soon were steaming away towards Coutances. Steaming very leisurely at the rate of about five miles an hour, with a ten or fifteen minutes' pause at the different stations.

But it came to an end at last, and we found ourselves struggling up the steeps of Coutances in the heavy, lumbering hotel omnibus,

which was built upon narrow principles that permitted people neither to get in nor to get out. It was, however, the only "narrow" thing about the hotel, which is conducted in a broad and liberal spirit. And when we stopped before its hospitable portals, monsieur and madame came out and welcomed us as if we had been "enfants de la maison." All this adds to the pleasure and happiness of travel; it will make a difference to our lives when the end comes; it helps a little to surround each day with a rose-coloured atmosphere: and each day is a little life in itself.

We still had half-an-hour's leisure before dinner, and we made straight for the Cathedral. It looked magnificent in the gathering gloom; a thing of beauty and mystery and intensity. Within, the aisles were in deep shadow, darkness was falling. There were a few kneeling figures about, motionless as the images before which they told their beads; a few lights brought out the depth of the interior, making its immensity seem boundless in the gloom beyond; but no ray penetrated to the roof, where all was silence and darkness.

It was a wonderfully beautiful and impressive picture, and we sat down in the centre aisle and allowed its influence to fall upon us. All we had seen and gone through the last two days passed before us; but as we strained our gaze into the solemn darkness and gloom, from every aisle and arch there seemed to rise up the vision of a fair young face and a spoilt life, with the saddest expression that face ever bore: the face and expression we had left behind us that day in the Monastery of La Trappe.



EVENING

(From Victor Hugo.)

THE calm of evening falls upon the plain:
Here let us rest. The sunset gilds again
The old arch—silent skies lie over us.

A far forge answers to the Angelus.

God on the bell, man on the anvil, strike
The same key-note; and star and hearth alike
Illuminate. Our destiny is here,
In these two sounds—mysterious—austere.
They take the helm, my sweet! they point the way:
The forge says "Work"—the Vesper bell says "Pray."

C. E. MEETKERKE.

LILIA ALEXANDROVNA.

A Story of Russian Peasant Life.

BY F. M. F. SKENE.

I.

"Life, like the ice, breaks in unexpected places."—*Russian proverb.*

IN the heart of a great Russian forest, where numerous bears and wolves roam unmolested, there stands a lordly mansion, called by the peasants in the neighbourhood "the palace of the Barins" (masters). It is the abode of the noble family of the de Sarionoffs, who for many centuries have owned the vast estates of which the wide-spreading woods form only an inconsiderable portion. The nearest town—Kostroma on the Volga—is many miles distant, and in winter, when there are forty degrees of cold and the snow lies on the ground to a great depth for months together, the isolation of the inhabitants of the district from the rest of the world is absolute and complete. At present, however, the brief summer is still shedding a faint glow of heat over the land, and Kola de Sarionoff, the young proprietor, is standing on a long wooden terrace of the house, which faces the sunset, with his beautiful newly-married wife. Lilia Alexandrovna is of Russian parentage, and, according to custom, she is called by the Christian name of her father joined to her own; but her mother was a Greek lady, and from her she has inherited the classic loveliness of her exquisite features, the waving masses of soft brown hair, and the pure colourless complexion which gave her somewhat an appearance of delicacy. Kola had wooed and won her under the burning skies of Greece, and he is looking at her now with no small dismay on his fine handsome countenance.

"I cannot bear to think of your passing the long cold winter here quite alone, *doushenka*. If I had known such a trial was in store for us, I could not have dared to link you to my fate."

"Then you would have deprived me of the only happiness I desire," she answered, laying her charming head caressingly on his shoulder. "But is it quite inevitable, my Kola—must you go?"

"My sweet one, can you doubt it?—an order from the Czar! Do you not know that to disobey it would mean Siberia for life, if not death?"

She shuddered, as she replied quickly:

"Ah, then, love, do not hesitate; go at once, to-morrow, as you have arranged. After all, it will only be a separation of six months. You said this exploring expedition to South Africa, on which he sends you, will not last longer, and that is nothing compared with the terrible risks of which you speak."

"No, that is true; but it will seem to me unbearably long all the same. Are you sure, Lilia, that you will not regret having elected to stay here instead of going back to Athens, among your old friends, till I can claim you?"

"Oh no, Kola; it will be my best consolation in your absence to be in your own home, and do what I can for your poor peasants, who interest me very much. They are such strange, simple-minded people, and many of their customs are so very curious."

The young man looked down on the park which surrounded the house, where the beautiful tall birch trees, with their silver-white trunks and light leaves ever trembling, were now also covered with shining red berries: his gaze passed on the railing enclosing the whole, painted in yellow, black, and red, the *de Sarionoff* colours; and from thence to the bright cupolas of the village church, surmounted by golden crosses, which could just be seen from where they stood.

"Well, my Lilia," he said, "you may walk safely to the *Isbas* (cottages) as long as the summer weather continues, but in winter you must only go in a sledge over the snow, and never beyond the outskirts of the forest, for the wolves become very savage with hunger then, and it is most dangerous to meet them. They actually come close to our house at night. I have heard them howling for hours together."

"But I shall be safe within these thick walls," said Lilia, cheerfully, anxious to reassure her husband, whose depression of spirits was evidently very great. "I am a brave *châtelaine*; you cannot frighten me —"

"You cannot frighten me," echoed a peculiarly high, shrill voice, which was certainly not that of a human being, though the words were perfectly distinct. The young couple, looking round, saw a large grey parrot stalking solemnly towards them through the open window of the drawing-room, near which his cage was standing.

"There!" said Lilia, laughing. "You forgot that I shall have a most entertaining companion all the time you are away, in my wise Popka; and I expect he will afford me a great deal of amusement, for I have discovered that your peasants look upon him as an oracle who can prophecy the future. My maid told me yesterday that they are going to ask leave to come and consult him very often."

"Yes, I know," said Kola; "they never saw such a bird before you brought Popka here, and I believe they think he is a magician. You were not in the room last evening when some of the men who had taken too much vodka (brandy) at the *cabaret* passed through the park and stopped under the window to speak to the parrot. They waited some time till he emitted a few guttural sounds which I certainly did not understand; but the oldest man amongst them exclaimed at once, 'Come away, brothers; Popka says we are drunk and ought to go home.'"

"I am afraid Popka might often make the same remark about

your people," said Lilia, as she turned and went into the drawing-room with her husband; "that strong vodki seems to be a terrible temptation."

At that moment a servant came forward with the almost servile respect of manner which obtains among his class in Russia, and said that a young man from the village wished to see the Barin.

He was desired to usher him in at once. Lilia sat down with her parrot, which had been her favourite since her childhood, perched on her wrist, while Kola advanced to meet his tenant.

He came in—a tall, fine-looking peasant, about two-and-twenty years of age; his dark hair was cut short on his forehead, but hung in long locks over his back and shoulders. He wore a scarlet woollen shirt falling over his trousers, and high boots, and the costume was confined at the waist by a leathern belt. He advanced towards his master, and instantly fell on his knees before him, touching the ground with his forehead. In many Russian houses this customary mode of saluting a superior would have been taken as a matter of course, without any remonstrance; but M. de Sarionoff had breathed the free airs of more civilized countries, and never allowed this species of worship to be offered to him if he could help it.

"Rise, brother," he said, "you know how often I have told you that you must only kneel before the Lord our God." The young man rose obediently, and turned his large brown eyes with a very sorrowful look on his Barin.

"What is it, Harlano—you seem in trouble?"

"Ah, yes, Barin, a great misfortune—our little granary took fire last night, and is burnt down. All our provision of grain as food for the winter is destroyed."

"That is a misfortune, indeed," said Kola; "but I can remedy it, in part at least. I will give you money enough to replace your winter store."

"Ah! the Barin is good," said Harlano, stooping to kiss his master's arm and shoulder—the peasant's habitual token of gratitude; "but it is not all our grief. Misha, my father, was trying to save the grain last night, when the heat overcame him, and he fell to the ground in a fit—now he is dying."

"Let us hope not," said Lilia Alexandrovna, coming forward. "I may be able to help him to recover, as I know a little about medicine. The Barin is going away very early in the morning, but I will come to see Misha as soon afterwards as I can, and I will bring some good remedies with me."

"Gracious lady," said Harlano, bowing almost to the ground, "your coming will be like the feet of an angel passing over our threshold—but, with submission, I pray you not to bring any remedies with you. We would not wish Misha kept back from heaven now—my mother, Sacha, has washed him and dressed him for the burial,

and we have laid him under the holy *icons* (images) to die in peace."

"Nevertheless, if I can help him to live, I will, Haflano," said the lady, "you may tell Sacha to expect me very early to-morrow." The peasant bent profoundly before her in silence, once more pressed his lips to his master's shoulder, and went slowly out.

"The way in which your peasants regard death is the strangest problem in the world to me, Kola," said Lilia, when the man had gone. "Not only do they meet it with the most perfect calm and resignation, but they seem actually to welcome it and rejoice in its approach."

"Yes, that is so," said de Sarionoff. "Our moujiks (peasants) look upon death as a deliverance, sent by God, from all the toils and cares of their earthly life; if they see any hope of its overtaking them, they make ready for it with delight and alacrity by having themselves laid in the place of honour under the images, and they refuse all food or medicine. A stranger would certainly consider them devoid of feeling or affection if he saw them helping their friends to die as quickly as possible; but it is simply because they believe it to be the happiest and most desirable event that can in any way befall them. This belief can even overcome a mother's love for her child. I sent the doctor once to a little girl, who was in a precarious state, and he cured her for the time; but when she fell ill again later, he was not allowed to come near her, because the mother said she was not going to have her kept back in this weary world a second time."

"That seems almost incredible," said Lilia; "though it is true that the life of the Russian moujiks is terribly hard and degraded. Still, that even from the saddest home a mother would willingly see her child go down to the grave is almost more than I can believe."

"You will soon be convinced that their belief in the blessedness of death goes even to that extent, if you visit among our moujiks as you intend to do. I once heard a woman from a distant village talking to the mother of a large family among our own people, and telling her that there had been a great epidemic among the children in her district, which had caused them to die by hundreds. 'Ah, you are lucky,' our peasant said. 'God never sends us any pestilence of that kind, and our children all continue to live and thrive, unfortunately.'"

"What an odious speech," exclaimed Lilia, shuddering; "such principles are really not to be tolerated. I shall try whether I cannot give your moujiks some better ideas during your absence, Kola. You see I shall have plenty to do."

She tried to speak to him bravely, but her heart was very sad through that last evening, and her husband's not less so, for he knew he should not see her beautiful face again for six long months. The parting came at a very early hour next morning, and Lilia Alexandrovna was left alone with the parrot Popka as her sole companion,

who was, however, destined to play a very important part in the history of the peasant village during the coming winter.

II.

"The steersman Time sits hidden astern
With dark hand plying the rudder of doom."

LILIA felt that her best solace after the *départure* of her adored husband would be found in taking help and comfort to the peasant family of whose sorrows she had heard the evening before. She was very soon, therefore, on her way to the village. It consisted of about twenty *isbas* or cottages, all alike formed solely of the bark of trees, which in time take an ashy grey colour; the front of each is pierced by three small windows and a low door, above which is a round hole for the birds to go out and in unmolested.

These cottages stand in a straight row along the road, but there is one rather larger, made, not merely of bark, but of planks, which is the house of the parish priest, who is always called *Batoushka* (little father). His church stands near on a little height; it is a beautiful sanctuary, built in the seventeenth century by the Sarionoff family, and is called the church of the Transfiguration. The services on Sundays and fête days are enlivened by really beautiful singing, for Russian peasants have a natural taste for music; but during the week the priest, not much more cultivated than his congregation, works in the fields like any other labourer.

Arrived at the door of Misha's *isba*, Lilia knocked gently, and it was at once opened by his wife, Sacha Tranova. She was a very handsome woman, her beauty heightened by the picturesque native costume. She wore a bright coloured handkerchief on her dark hair, a white undergarment with wide sleeves, over which was a long robe called a *sarafan*, held up by braces over the shoulders and secured immediately under the arms by a gay scarf; her feet were bare but for a curious flat shoe, made of strips of birch-tree bark twined together.

Bending low to kiss the lady's hand, Sacha begged her to enter, and Lilia walked into the one room of which the *isba* was composed. The walls of bark were lined with moss to keep out the cold air; a huge oven built of brick filled one side, on the top of which the whole family slept at night. A table and some wooden benches, with a box for the Sunday clothes, formed the whole furniture, with the exception of two or three icons, or images, placed in an elevated position near the low ceiling. They are painted on wood, generally with a nimbus of real silver round the head of the saint.

On a bench below these, dressed in his best clothes, the dying man, Misha, was extended, looking, certainly, very ill, but with a perfectly placid and happy expression of countenance. Lilia went up to him and took his hand kindly.

"I am sorry to see you looking so pale, Misha," she said, "but I

have brought you some wine, and a little nourishing food. You will let me give it to you ——”

“Oh, lady, no, I cannot take anything; it might keep me back in this toilsome world, and I am quite ready and prepared to go. I have had the Communion from the Batoushka; and have only to wait patiently now—God is sending me deliverance.”

“But it may not be God’s will that you should die yet, Misha—if you would only take means for your recovery.”

“I know it is His will,” he answered; “I have been called. Do you not know, lady, that every one whose time is come hears a voice that calls his name while he seems still in perfect health? I was called yesterday morning when I was quite well. I was out alone in the forest, and I heard a voice clear as a silver bell saying my name three times, Misha—Misha—Misha; then I knew my hour was come, and I was so glad. Take the wine away, lady; I would not live again for all the world; who knows what new sins I might commit?”

“Ah, lady,” said Sacha, coming forward, “we have a warning here never to draw anyone back from death when they have been called. Look there,” she continued, pointing to a very old woman who sat crouching on the floor close to the stove; “that is my mother, Zenobia. Eight years ago she heard the voice call her in the dead of the night, and was so rejoiced that her time was come! In the morning we washed her and dressed her in her Sunday clothes for burial, and laid her under the icons; and for five days nothing passed her lips—not even a drop of water, and she had got very weak and was nearly gone; but the Barina, your husband’s mother, came to see her, and forced her to eat and drink; so that she got well and rose up again in this sorrowful world; and she has had eight years more of toil and misery and cold, and cannot tell even now when she may go. Ah, it was a cruel misfortune for her, though the Barina meant well.”

“Yes, yes, lady,” said the old woman in a croaking voice; “do not interfere when the voice has spoken. Leave my son Misha to depart: happy is he!”

Lilia saw it was in vain to combat their inveterate superstition. She gave the provisions she had brought to Sacha, saying she hoped the rest of the family would at least profit by them; and having taken leave of the serene, complacent Misha, she went out somewhat sadly. She strolled a little way into the forest, not venturing to go very far lest she should meet with a bear, as she had once done already when walking with her husband; and there, under a huge tree, her eyes suddenly fell on a young couple who, in their bright happiness, afforded a strange contrast to the sad scene she had quitted.

Harlano, Misha and Sacha’s handsome young son, was standing there, with his arm round the waist of a very pretty girl, dressed in

the becoming peasant costume, and raising a pair of beautiful eyes to her lover's face. Lilia knew her well, and was aware also that she was Harlano's betrothed. She would not disturb them or interrupt the engrossing conversation in which they were engaged, and which prevented them from observing her; so she stole back softly behind the trees, and went home by another path.

Misha died in a few days, as was to be expected after a week of deliberate starvation, and was buried, arrayed in his finest clothes, in the little graveyard which surrounded the church.

About a week later Lilia Alexandrovna was sitting in her drawing-room with no other companion than her venerable parrot, whose reputation for consummate wisdom and a mysterious knowledge of the secrets of the future had become so solemn an article of faith for the peasants that they were wont to come every afternoon, on their way home from work, to sit in rows before the lady's window until it pleased her to bring out the wonderful bird, and allow them just to feast their eyes upon him, as she good-naturedly did most days. She had given an order to her servants that any peasant who wished to see her, and seemed to be in distress, was to be at once admitted to her presence; and as she sat quietly reading, the door suddenly opened and Sacha Tranova entered, showing unmistakable signs of being in violent grief. She prostrated herself on the ground before the lady, in spite of Lilia's remonstrances; and being forcibly raised, stood, with hands clasped and tears streaming from her eyes, as she poured forth her tale of woe and urged her petition.

"Oh, lady! lady! Such a cruel misfortune has befallen us! Harlano, my beautiful son, has received the order to go out as a soldier. He may not delay a day: he is to leave us to-morrow and go to Kostroma at once, to deliver himself up to the military commander. It is heart-breaking!"

"But, Sacha, you must have expected this to happen," said Lilia, gently. "You know that all the young men from the villages in Russia have to join the army or navy, sooner or later."

"Yes, but I thought he would be exempt because his father is just dead, and he was to have been married at the holy Christmas. His betrothed, Minodora, has come with me to implore your help. She is there, but she dare not come in."

Lilia looked up and saw through the half-open door a young girl shyly peeping in, and at once recognised her as the same she had seen in the forest with Harlano; but the pretty face which had then been so sunny and smiling was now bathed in tears and sadly changed in its despairing expression.

"Come in, Minodora," she said, kindly; "do not be afraid," and the sorrowful little peasant ran across the room and flung herself at her feet. "Ah, lady, grant our prayer," she said as Lilia raised her.

"But what is there I can do for you?" she answered. "I will gladly help you if it is in my power."

"We have come," said Sacha, "to entreat of you to allow us to consult the august Popka as to whether our dear Harlano will ever return to us. May we ask him, lady? You can see that he has listened to all we have said," she continued, glancing timidly at the parrot, who was sitting solemnly on his perch with his head on one side.

"Oh, certainly, you may speak to him if you think he can tell you anything," said Lilia, smiling; and the two women thereupon approached the wise bird with low bows and in the most deferential manner possible.

Sacha acted as spokeswoman, and in very humble terms begged the inspired Popka to tell them if their beloved Harlano would ever return to his home. Popka looked at her askance for a moment, and then croaked an answer which was quite unintelligible to Lilia, but which made Minodora almost dance on her little feet with delight, while Sacha raised her hands in devout thanksgiving.

"The saints be praised," she exclaimed. "The wise Popka has said *verniobsia* (he will return); we may comfort our hearts, Minodora."

"But why should you fear he will not return?" asked Lilia. "All soldiers are allowed to visit their homes after some years, are they not?"

"Yes, lady, if they behave well; but my Harlano is very high-spirited and hot-tempered. I have feared he would never stand the blows and hard treatment he will receive from his officers, as they all do; and you know if he were to rebel he would be instantly shot; but I have hope and consolation now, for the great Popka has spoken—he will return."

The two peasants then took leave of the lady, with many expressions of gratitude, telling her at the same time that the farewell service for Harlano would be held in the church of the Transfiguration next morning. Lilia promised to be present, for she had always admired the custom of sending out the young men who were called to be soldiers or sailors with a parting blessing.

At an early hour next day she went to her usual place in the beautiful church, where the batoushka was already intoning the musical chants of the Russian service. Then Sacha was seen advancing, weeping bitterly, and holding her son by the hand, while Minodora followed behind, pale and downcast. They joined in the rite with many prostrations when holy names were spoken; and when the service was over, the whole congregation stood up to see the solemn parting between mother and son. Sacha blessed Harlano with uplifted eyes, and made the sign of the cross over him three times, touching his forehead, shoulder, and breast with her right hand. He blessed her in precisely the same manner, and then they parted, perhaps never to meet again.

III.

"Green leaves and blossoms and sunny warm weather,
And singing and loving, come back together."

FOUR months had passed away, and the scene round the Sarionoff's palace was sadly changed.

It was deep winter now, nothing but unbroken tracts of snow were to be seen from Lilia's windows, and the cold was almost beyond endurance. Popka had betaken himself to the top of the huge stove, on which he sat moodily all day long, his oracular utterances being delivered in a very sulky tone. Lilia never left her well-heated rooms unless she heard of any distress or disaster among the peasants in the village, when she would summon up courage to drive there in her sledge, wrapt from head to foot in furs, with a hot-water bottle at her feet and another on her lap, while herself and her driver alike were covered over with thick blankets, leaving only their heads visible above them. In this guise they would skim over the surface of the snow, now many feet deep and hardened to the consistency of stone by the intense frost.

It was only, however, on some great emergency that the southern-born lady ventured out into this Arctic temperature, and such occurred one morning when her servant came to tell her that he heard there was some great tribulation in Sacha Tranova's isba, and although he could not tell what was the misfortune that had fallen upon them, he believed it was of some very serious description. This was quite enough to make kind-hearted Lilia brave even that terrible cold, and within an hour her sledge, with its pretty bells ringing clear in the frosty air, had stopped before the door of the peasant's cottage.

She disengaged herself with some difficulty from her heavy coverings, and told the driver to go home and return for her in an hour, as it would have simply killed her thorough-bred ponies if they had been allowed to stand even a few minutes in that atmosphere. She pushed open the door and went into the one room of the isba, which was quite sufficiently warmed by the huge stove glowing with heat.

She stopped, astonished at the scene before her—Sacha, Minodora, and even the infirm old mother Zenobia, were all prostrate on the ground before the images, while their voices rose in a chorus of wailing and lamentation which almost stunned her. The lady's entrance, however, effected an immediate cessation of their cries and prayers. They all three rose to their feet, not forgetting, in spite of their distress, to offer their customary homage by kissing her hand and shoulder, while they exclaimed that she was indeed an angel to have come to their succour.

"But what is the matter," said Lilia; "what has happened to distress you all so much?" The question called forth another burst of weeping from all three, mingled with some incoherent ejaculation

"Come, Sacha," said the lady, kindly taking her hand, "calm yourself, and tell me quietly what is grieving you."

The woman made an effort to control herself, but still quivered with agitation as she spoke.

"Lady, you know that for the past month there has been a brigand in the forest: he appeared one night in a lonely isba, killed the whole family lying asleep on their stove, and he has lived there ever since, going out by night wrapt in bear skins to plunder the cottages, and threaten to shoot all the people if they do not let him take what he will; he is so fierce and daring, like a very demon, he terrifies them all out of their senses, and a price is set on his head by the Government. He will be taken suddenly some day and executed; and oh, lady, lady, the saints be merciful to us! a man we know who caught a glimpse of him, says he is my Harlano!"

"Harlano!" exclaimed Lilia, "impossible; he would never be so wicked; and besides, of course, he is with his regiment in St. Petersburg."

"The man said no doubt he had deserted," said Sacha; "it is what I always feared he would do. You know, lady, the life of a Russian soldier is very terrible, beaten and abused perpetually by his superior officers. Harlano is so high-spirited, I felt sure he would never stand it; and if he has deserted he could not of course dare to come here, where he would be arrested at once—perhaps nothing was left to him but to become a brigand, that he might not perish of cold and starvation."

"But Harlano was good," said Minodora, timidly.

"Yes, Harlano was a good, kindhearted young man," said Lilia; "and you ought to have a better opinion of your son than to suppose he could do this wickedness, Sacha."

"But the man saw him, and knew him," said old Zenobia, oracularly.

"He only got one glimpse of him in the dark," said Minodora, eagerly; "he might have been mistaken."

"Certainly he might; I fully believe he was," said Lilia. "I cannot think so badly of good Harlano. But the truth must be ascertained; that is what we have to do now, if it is in any way possible."

"Popka will know," exclaimed Sacha. "Do you think he would tell us, lady? They say that since the cold set in he has kept a rigid silence most days."

"It is nonsense to suppose Popka could tell you," said the lady, impatiently. "If only it were possible for anyone to reach Kostroma in this terrible cold, I would send a letter to be posted there for my husband's brother, who is himself a Colonel in the army—he could ascertain at once if Harlano has deserted, and even if he found it was so, he would not denounce him for my sake—he is in St. Petersburg now, I know."

"Oh, lady, for pity's sake send that letter," exclaimed the three women in chorus. "Let us know the truth, even if it is to tear our hearts! Dear lady send, oh send, the letter."

"But how?" said Lilia. "There is no post here in winter as you know—and it is eighteen miles to Kostroma. The Barin would not allow me to send his horses or servants such a distance in this dreadful cold—they might die by the way and nothing would be gained."

Minodora suddenly came forward, her eyes sparkling, her cheeks glowing, and flung herself upon her knees before Lilia.

"Lady" she exclaimed, "I know a way by which the letter can be sent—only of your blessed goodness go home and write it—I will come for it and it will be taken safely. For the love of heaven do not delay; oh, write it—write it."

"But how can you send it, Minodora—do you know of anyone going to undertake that dangerous journey?"

"Yes, yes, I do; it has but to be written, and without delay. Lady, I hear your sledge bells, it has come to the door for you. I beseech you to go home and write the letter—in half an hour I will be at your palace waiting for it."

Lilia could only conclude that the girl did know of someone whose business might have driven him to undertake the perilous journey to Kostroma. at that dreadful season, and, glad to help the sorrowing family, she got at once into her sledge and drove home to write to her brother-in-law, Colonel de Sarionoff.

She had only time to give him a full statement of the whole affair and to beg him, if Harlano really still was with his regiment, to obtain his discharge by the payment of the large sum of money necessary for the purpose, which she would restore to him, when she was told that Minodora was come, and awaited her orders. Lilia desired the servant to admit her at once, and the girl came in wearing high boots under her long red sarafan, and an enormous sheepskin which enveloped her from head to foot. It was in fact the skins of several animals, joined together. It was drawn over her hair and round the lower part of her face, leaving little more than her bright eyes visible through the wool.

Lilia gave her the letter, showing her that it was stamped, and telling her that the man who took it had simply to post it, and from Kostroma it would, even at that season, go safely to St. Petersburg. "I only hope he will not be frozen to death on the way, whoever he is," she added. "I can hardly imagine anyone living long out of doors in this weather."

"God can keep the heart warm, lady," was Minodora's somewhat enigmatical answer; and with a low obeisance she went out.

It was not till evening, many hours later, that Lilia's maid asked her if she was aware that Minodora had gone herself to Kostroma with the letter. Poor Lilia was dismayed and terrified

beyond measure at these tidings, though she could not help admiring the young girl's self-devotion on behalf of her betrothed. "Oh, she will die, she will perish in the snow," she exclaimed, in much distress; "but we can do nothing to help her now; may God protect her." Then she added softly to herself, "I would have done as much for Kola!"

There ensued a period of cruel suspense for the peasant family, and for Lilia on their behalf. Minodora was an orphan who had lived for some years with Sacha, and, apart from the fact that she was to be Harlano's wife, the good woman loved her dearly. No tidings of her fate reached them in any shape, excepting that Colonel de Sarionoff sent an immediate answer to his sister-in-law, which was brought by a special messenger in a swift-running sledge from Kostroma. He said that he would at once make enquiries about Harlano, and would obtain his discharge if it proved that he had not been mad enough to desert; in which case his fate was sealed and no one could save him. He was certain to be taken eventually and shot, all the sooner if he had really become a brigand.

The fact that Colonel de Sarionoff had received Lilia's letter was a sufficient proof that Minodora had reached Kostroma alive, but it was not known till long afterwards that she was found lying insensible on the snow in front of the post-office. Apparently with a last effort of her failing strength she had placed the letter in the receiving box, and then had succumbed to the biting cold. She was taken to the public hospital and there remained dangerously ill for some weeks.

Lilia kept up a close correspondence with her husband, though her letters and his answers were a very long time on their travels before they reached their destination. She told him the whole story of Harlano and the brigand; and begged him, when he came to St. Petersburg on his way home, to join with his brother in trying to trace the poor young man.

Meanwhile the atrocities of the forest brigand increased, and struck terror into the whole neighbourhood. The idea that he might be Harlano gained ground, and Sacha was in consequence shunned by the peasants living near her. It was a very dreary time for all concerned; and the first gleam of light on the darkness of their suspense came with the approach of spring. The cold was beginning to give way to some extent; and suddenly one evening in the dusk a sledge arrived at Sacha's door, from which Minodora sprang out and fell weeping into her arms. She had been sent home from the hospital by some charitable persons, and was very pale and thin; nor did she regain her blooming looks even in her home, for she, like the other inmates of the *isba*, was still consumed with anxiety about Harlano.

It was with inexpressible delight that Lilia saw the snow melting with the passing of winter, and the huge blocks of ice floating down the river; for she knew that with the first spring days her adored

husband was to return to her, having gained great distinction from his successful management of the exploring expedition in Africa.

Communication was once more possible with Kostroma and St. Petersburg ; and one blissful morning Lilia Alexandrovna received a letter from Kola, telling her to expect him on the following day, and begging her to summon Sacha and Minodora to meet him also in his house, as he was bringing them tidings of Harlano.

"Surely it must be good news!" they exclaimed, when they received this message, "or the Barin would have warned them to be prepared for the anguish they had dreaded ever since they first heard of the mysterious brigand."

They were at the palace, as they called the Barin's house, long before the hour named for his arrival ; while Lilia, almost as early, was stationed at the window to gain the first glimpse of his approach. His dog-cart had been sent to Kostroma to meet him, as the roads were at last quite open ; and when the first sound of the wheels was heard coming through the park, Lilia flew down to the outer door, while Sacha and Minodora stood respectfully behind, and Popka, perched on his mistress's shoulder, fluttered his wings as if sharing in the general excitement.

The dog-cart appeared through the trees ; it came rapidly to the door and stopped. There was Kola de Sarionoff, browned by the African sun, and as handsome as ever. He sprang to the ground, and clasped his dear wife in his arms.

But who is this who, with one bound, has darted from his place beside the groom at the back of the carriage, and almost fallen on his knees before Sacha and Minodora ? It is none other than Harlano himself, who is making pious thanksgiving to all the saints for the bliss of seeing them once more. Sacha, almost beside herself with joy, raises him up and holds him to her heart ; while Minodora silently takes his hand within her own, and kisses it with passionate love. Even in the midst of her own deep happiness, Lilia does not forget to sympathise with her poor peasants. She turns round, holding her husband's arm, to look at the joyful group.

"Harlano!" she exclaims. "Then all is surely well?"

"Yes ; he is not the brigand!" says Sacha, almost screaming with delight. "He cannot have been the brigand, or the Barin would not have brought him home."

"The brigand! No, indeed," said de Sarionoff. "How could you believe such a calumny of your good son, Sacha Tranova? Harlano has done his duty well in his regiment, and never left it till I bought his discharge, because your lady wished it."

"The saints reward your highness!" exclaimed Sacha. "But how, then, was the terrible brigand said to be so like my Harlano?"

"The brigand is Stepan Katow, a scoundrel who was caught by the gens-d'armes in the act of setting fire to an isba, where an infirm old man still lay, whom he had robbed of all he possessed. He is a

man the same height as Harlano, and with a slight resemblance to him. But it matters not who he is like : he has gone to his doom, and will trouble our forests no more."

"No more!" croaked Popka ; and Sacha received this solemn assurance with even greater satisfaction than the words of her master.

A few weeks later there was a pretty peasant wedding in the Church of the Transfiguration. A picturesque part of the Russian rite is the holding of golden crowns over the heads of the bride and bridegroom while they follow the priest in a slow procession round the altar ; and this duty is always performed by the most influential of their friends. It was considered in the village that extraordinary honour was done to Harlano and Minodora, because those who crowned them in the supreme moment of their lives were the stately Barin himself and his beautiful wife, Lilia Alexandrovna.



SONNET.

'Twas at the very birth of ancient time
That first the poet's endless song began ;
The deeds, the loves, the joys, the woes of man,
He sang, unfettered yet by rhythm or rhyme.
And still he sings deeds fearful and sublime,
And love and death, and high and lowly things,
And peasants, emperors and kings,
All souls in clay—through every age and clime
The poet sings. Swift may run in his glass
His sand ; he careth not ; than death more strong
He knows to be that breath from God called song.
And evermore, in high melodious verse,
The glories of God's glorious universe
He sings to generations as they pass.

JULIA KAVANAGH.

A TERRIBLE APPARITION.

ONE day last summer, having nothing very particular to do, I sat down before an old cabinet and commenced looking over the papers with which the drawers were filled.

The cabinet had not long been in my possession, it having belonged to a maternal uncle of mine, who, dying recently, bequeathed it to me. He had led rather an eccentric life, seeing but little of his friends, and travelling a great deal about Europe. From time to time he would write very long accounts of his travels and adventures to a favourite niece. (I have prefaced what follows with these remarks, as I think they may help to elucidate it.) On nearing the bottom of the second drawer I came upon a good-sized account book, which on opening I found was filled with my uncle's handwriting. At the top of the first page were these words :

"I send you the enclosed account of an extraordinary adventure which befell me here in Lisbon about a week since. I have not exaggerated in the smallest particular what occurred, and I have committed it to paper whilst all the details are vividly before me. Not that I think for one moment they will ever fade in the least degree from my memory, but I thought it might entertain you and your brothers and sisters at the approaching time of Christmas. Please take care of it."

Having read this, I proceeded with much interest to read the truly extraordinary adventure, which, after some hesitation, I have published, feeling that lying here in this drawer it can divert none, whilst if made public it may help a few to while away, as it did me, a half-hour that otherwise would have hung heavily on their hands.

The manuscript ran thus :—

I forget whether I have told you in any of my former letters that the last time I was in Lisbon, I quite by chance made the acquaintance of, and became great friends with, our consul here. Amongst many other little acts of kindness and civility, he gave me last week an introduction to one of the smartest and wealthiest Portuguese families residing here. Little did he know that his well-meant act of kindness was nearly to prove the means of a misfortune well-nigh irretrievable in its consequences to me. I at once availed myself of the introduction by attending an afternoon *conversazione* at their palace.

This was followed the next morning by an invitation to a masqued ball the next evening. This I accepted, but was at a loss to know what costume to go in. I should infinitely have preferred going in simple evening dress, but was prevented from doing so by its being

stated on the card of invitation that all the guests were expected to come in masqued attire.

The time was short, so I determined to call on the consul and ask him about it. Accordingly to him I went, and by his advice I determined to go attired as a Franciscan monk. This he very justly observed would be a dress quickly obtained, and it also had the merit of being inexpensive.

It is now the fashion in Portuguese society to commence balls at an unusually late hour, so I was not surprised at the fact that I was not invited till half past ten. I determined not to arrive till nearly eleven, as I should then see the whole thing in full swing. The night being lovely, and the distance from my hotel to the palace of the Duke de F— being less than a mile, I determined to walk.

At about half past ten I set out, arrayed in my monk's garb. I must confess I felt a queer sensation as I glided along through the crowded streets with a pair of sandals strapped on under a very thin pair of slippers. I fancied everyone eyed me suspiciously, and altogether I did not feel at my ease in my newly-assumed character. I quickened my pace and presently turned into a badly-lit square, so common in all large foreign towns. I passed up one side of it, but was in some little doubt which corner I ought to go out at. I paused for a moment to consider, and seeing a tall figure approaching determined to enquire of it my way. When it got close to me I saw it was that of a man: he was enveloped in a large Spanish cloak, and had a big slouched hat pulled down over his face, completely hiding his features.

What was my surprise when on coming close to me he stopped, and looked eagerly at me for a minute from under his slouched hat. I asked him the way to the F—s' Palace, and he directed me in a voice which seemed full of agitation and grief.

To his directions he added these words in a peculiarly impressive way, "Be quick, you may yet be in time."

Before I could say more he had vanished into the darkness. How strange thought I: could he on account of my disguise have mistaken me for someone else? His directions agreed with what I thought was the right way, and in a few minutes more I stood in front of my destination, which was all ablaze with light. I rang the bell, and whilst waiting for admission I could not help being struck by the complete silence which seemed to pervade the huge mansion. Surely, I thought, most of the guests must have assembled by this time, and moreover, the dancing must be at its height. What then means this unearthly stillness?

My musing was now cut short by the opening of the great door by a richly-liveried servant, who, without demanding my name, at once ushered me into a large and very splendid room, brilliantly illuminated by a great many wax candles set in silver candlesticks and placed all about the apartment.

I was at first dazzled by the sudden blaze of light, and only perceived after a minute or so had elapsed that the room contained no one but myself. I looked round in astonishment ; instead of the gay and laughing throng, there met my eyes the following curious sight.

In the centre of the room stood a low dais, over which was thrown a white covering made of some fine material and richly embroidered. Round it were placed a large majority of the candles. For a few minutes I stood irresolute, then, feeling sure the servant had shown me into the wrong apartment, I returned to the door, intending to recall him or find my way to the ball-room. Imagine my discomfiture on opening the door to find the hall through which I had entered in utter darkness. I took up one of the candles and made a close inspection of the various doors leading from it ; all were securely fastened and completely baffled my efforts to open them.

I returned to the room and searched most carefully for the bell, but could find none. Once more I entered the hall and called aloud, but the mocking echo of my voice as it reverberated through its ample and lofty dimensions was all the answer I received. Alarmed and disturbed in mind, I returned the candle to its place and sat down. The hands of a clock on the mantelpiece pointed to half-past eleven. What was to be done ? Must I spend the whole night in this strange abode of silence ?

Suddenly a most curious and unaccountable feeling began to creep over me. You know I am a thorough unbeliever in the supernatural, yet I must confess this feeling was very akin to fear. It was a sort of consciousness that I was not alone in the room. Presently I found myself staring fixedly at that dais with its white covering. Once or twice before I had resolved to lift that veil and see what it hid, but my will was always stronger than my intention, and I did not approach it. Still I longed to know what was underneath, and that longing every minute grew more powerful. I fancied all kinds of things, but somehow or other my mind always came back to the idea that beneath there lay a human body.

Gradually I became so charmed as it were by its presence that I could not muster sufficient will-power to take my eyes off it for one instant. I imagined at last I could see through the white surface in front of me. I fancied I could see the rigid form of a corpse ! Then suddenly a silvern chime from the mantelpiece announced midnight.

Did my eyes deceive me or not ? With the first stroke of the tiny gong the covering began slowly but surely to move ! Yes, it was gradually slipping to the ground, and from under it was gradually rising the form of a lady. What a spectacle did that form present ! What a contrast of the living with the dead : of the perishable things of this world with eternity ! She was richly attired, and was bedecked in a mass of the costliest jewels, which sparkled and flashed again in the bright light. Her face was as livid as a corpse's ; her lips drawn apart enough to show a line of grinning teeth of pearly

whiteness ; her magnificent dark eyes were wide open, and fixed in a stony stare on me ; her hands, which were very slender, were slightly raised, and the tips of all the fingers were curved inwards.

No wonder I shall never forget that minute in my life when I faced that horrible apparition. I could neither speak nor move ; I was paralysed with fear. There we were, staring at each other, as immovable as two pieces of statuary. Now that form commenced to rise from the dais, now it stood erect in all its ghastliness, now it began slowly to advance towards me. Suddenly my senses returned, a sudden instinct came to me ; I sprang to the door, passed into the hall, and, banging the door behind me, felt for the key, but could find none. I turned and commenced trying to find an exit from the hall, but every door I found defied all my efforts to open it.

Presently I stopped and listened. Yes, that was a door opening, the door of that dreadful room, and those were steps advancing towards me. It must be that form approaching. Instinctively, I crouched in an angle of the wall ; on, on came those stealthy steps, ever drawing nearer. Now they were within a few feet of me, I could see nothing, I was enveloped in pitchy darkness. All at once the footsteps ceased, it had stopped close to me, almost touching me ; I dared not even draw my breath ; half-a-minute, perhaps, which seemed an age, passed thus ; then I felt a cold, clammy hand laid on my cheek. This proved too much for my already overwrought nerves ; I gave one loud, agonised shriek and fell in a swoon. As I fell, I thought I heard another shriek mingle with my own.

The noise of those shrieks aroused the household, and on regaining consciousness, I learnt the following facts :

It was entirely my masqued attire which had brought me into such a disagreeable position. It happened that that very afternoon, a certain countess had died very unexpectedly. According to an old custom among great Portuguese families, the body had been attired in a rich dress, and decked with all the deceased's jewels, and placed in one of the reception rooms of her palace, there surrounded by wax candles to await her confessor, a Franciscan monk, who lived in a monastery in the suburbs : the monk's business being to watch and pray by the body all night. As he did not arrive at the appointed hour, the major-domo of the establishment went to fetch him. It was this person I met and of whom I enquired my way. The friar, whose place I so unworthily filled, was found murdered the next morning, having met his fate whilst on his way to the palace. The lady was of course, not dead, but in a kind of trance. She is once more the belle of this city, and first and foremost in every gaiety.

MISGIVINGS.

I WROTE a letter to a distant land,
 Full of high hope and young expectancy ;
 It seemed the very stretching of my hand
 To you, across the sea.

"My friend," I said, "will feel my fingers' touch,
 Guess my eyes' glowing, catch my pulse's start—
 You will not think I write a word too much,
 Because you know my heart!"

And so I waited, satisfied and gay,
 My letter speeding over land and sea ;
 One morning, "It will reach your hand to-day,"
 I said ; "think well of me!"

Then days stole by, and weeks grew one by one,
 And you were silent still, as past they went ;
 And doubts crept up between me and the sun,
 Marring my life's content.

Perchance the letter had not reached your land
 Far distant? thus I questioned, sore perplexed ;
 Perhaps you cared no longer for the hand
 I held you?—that came next.

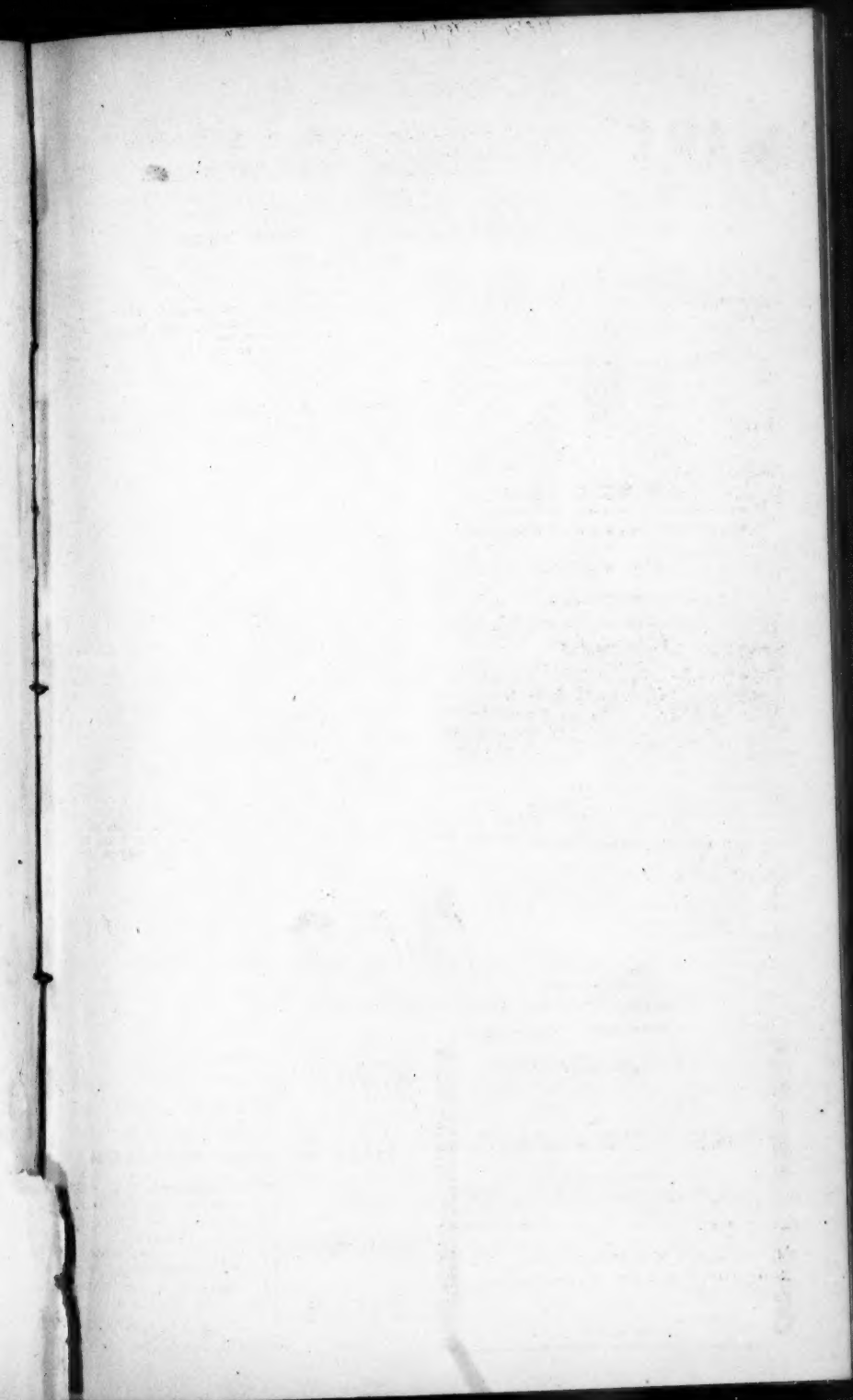
Perchance my burning words were wild and strange
 To ears that might forget my voice, I said ;
 Then torturing fancy leapt to worse than change—
 O God ! if you were dead !

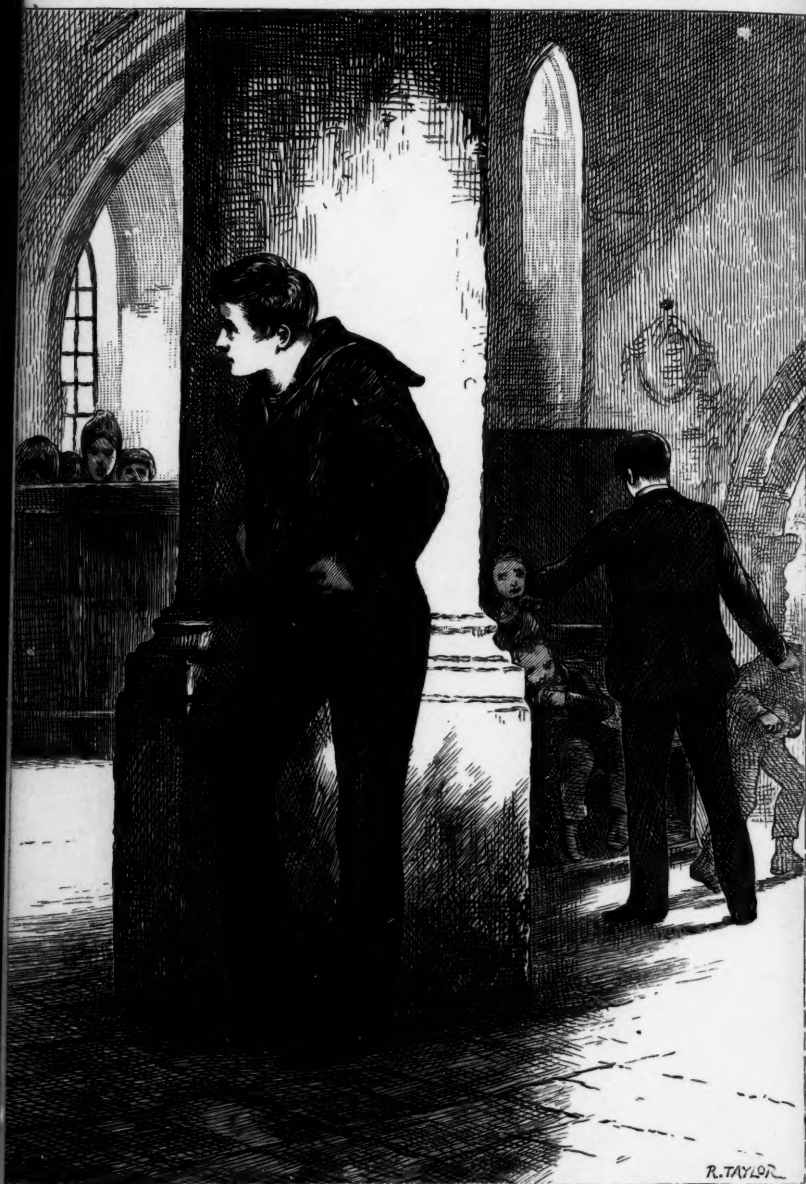
* * * * *

Lord, if it be Thy will to chasten me,
 From Thine own hands I meekly ask the pain,
 Let not my wretched, wavering soul be free
 To plague itself again !

For all the while, to bring me answer due,
 My friend was speeding over sea and land ;
 And my misgivings died at sight of you,
 Coming with outstretched hand !

G. B. STUART.





M. ELLEN STAPLES.

R. TAYLOR.

HESTER'S ATTENTION WAS ATTRACTED BY A YOUNG MAN NOT FAR BEHIND, WHOSE GAZE WAS FIXED UPON THE WEDDING PARTY WITH AN INTENSITY REMARKABLE TO BEHOLD.